

MELTDOWN

A HERO ON THE VERGE OF BURNING OUT. LITERALLY.



#1
OF 2

BOOK ONE RAGE & REGRET

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THEY SAY THAT WHEN YOU'RE
ABOUT TO DIE, YOUR ENTIRE LIFE
FLASHES BEFORE YOUR EYES.

I CAN TELL YOU THAT IT'S
ABSOLUTELY TRUE...



...AND I SPEAK FROM EXPERIENCE.

MY NAME'S "CALIENTE". "CAL"
FOR SHORT. I'M A SUPER-HERO.

AND I'M ABOUT TO DIE.

THIS IS MY STORY.







SCRATCH THAT PART
ABOUT BEING A SUPER-
HERO. I'M NO HERO.

HEROES DON'T
ACT THIS WAY.

SURE, I WEAR THE REQUISITE CHEEZY
COSTUME, DO MY BEST TO SAVE INNOCENT
LIVES, BUT THERE'S GOT TO BE **MORE** TO
BEING A "HERO" THAN JUST THAT.

FOR ME, IT'S JUST A
JOB, A PAYCHECK, A
DECENT MEDICAL PLAN.

DOESN'T TRUE HEROISM
REQUIRE SELFLESSNESS,
CARING, COMPASSION?

I'VE GOT **NONE**
OF THAT.

ALL I'VE GOT IS **HEAT**.

NOW
LET'S STEP
OUTSIDE.



YOU'RE NOT
GOING TO GIVE ME
A CHOICE HERE,
ARE YOU?



MORE AND MORE
LATELY, I FEEL LIKE
I'M CONSTANTLY
BURNING UP.

MY THOUGHTS MELTING
INTO EACH OTHER ... MY
BLOOD BOILING ... FIRE
RAGING IN MY GUT ...

SOMETIMES I CAN **CONTROL** THE HEAT,
KEEP IT **INSIDE**, KEEP IT IN CHECK.

BUT OTHER TIMES, THE HEAT TAKES
OVER. I JUST SEE RED, AND A LIFETIME'S
WORTH OF FEAR, ANGER, AND
FRUSTRATION COME RUSHING OVER ME,
AND I JUST CAN'T HOLD IT BACK.

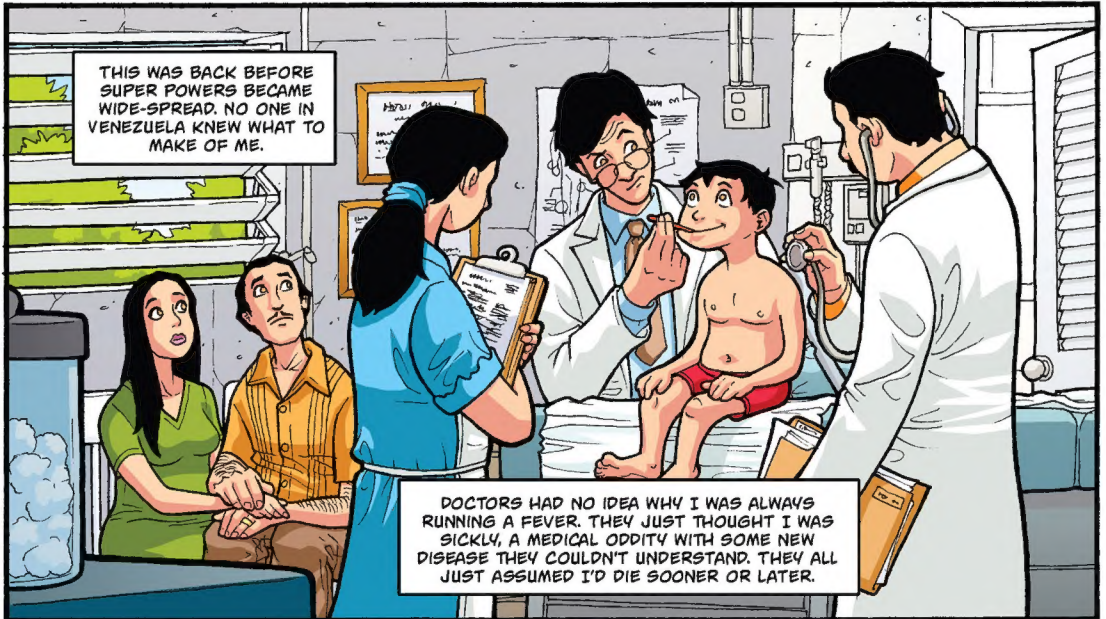
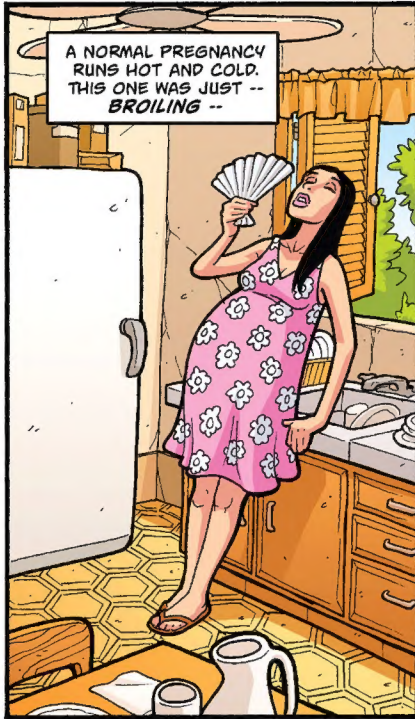
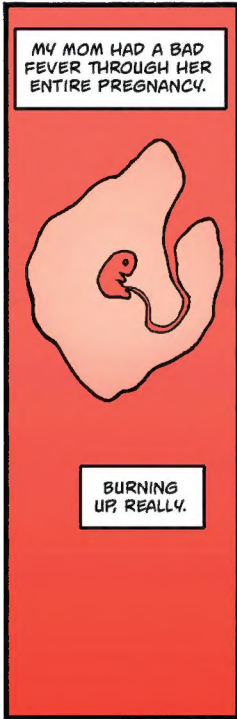


I WASN'T **ALWAYS**
LIKE THIS.



I WAS ONCE A KID
WITH HOPES,
DREAMS, AMBITIONS.

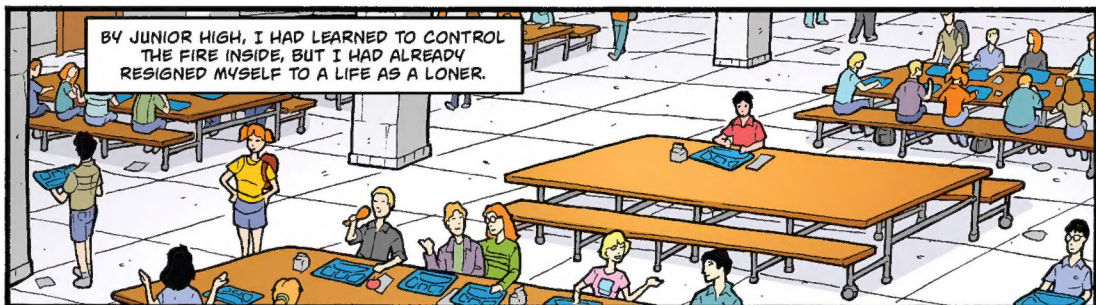
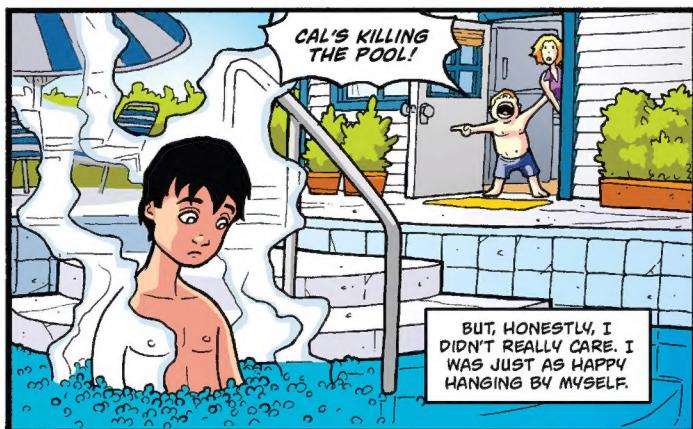
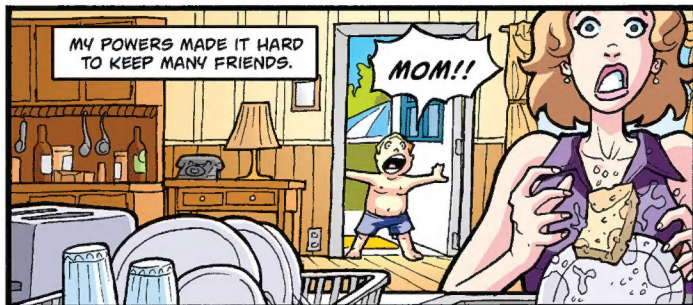
MILES AWAY
FROM THE BITTER,
DESPERATE
CREATURE I'VE
BECOME.

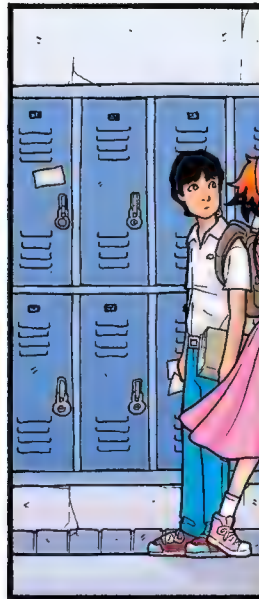
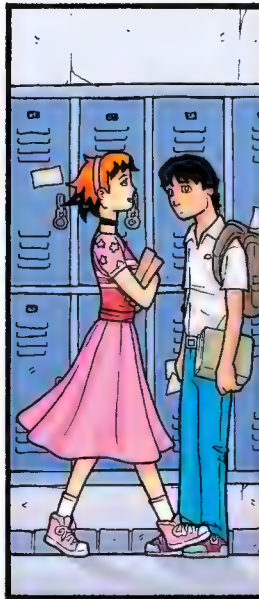
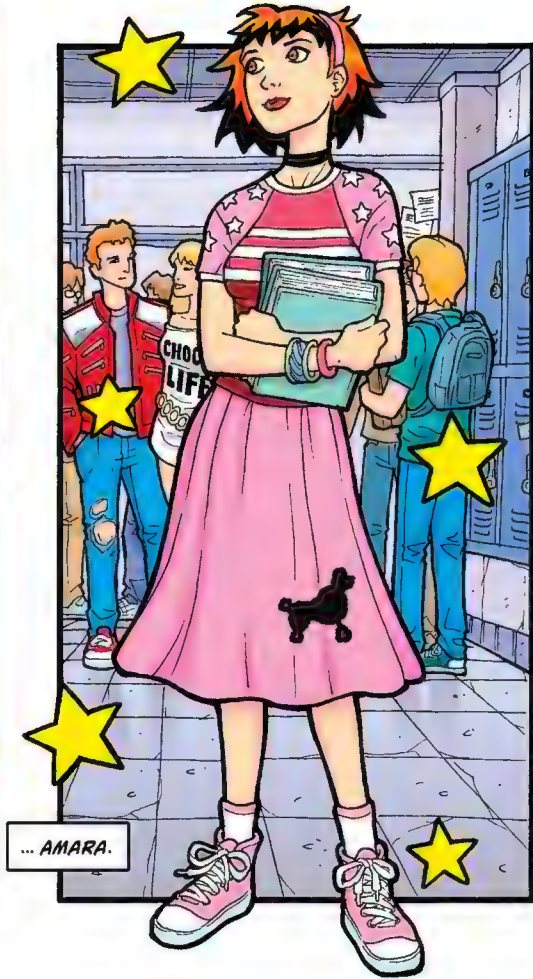
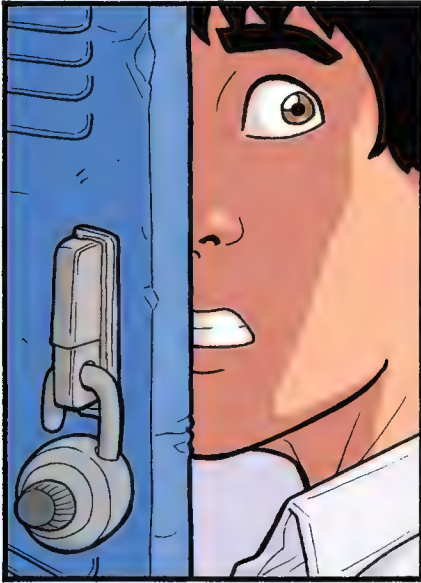
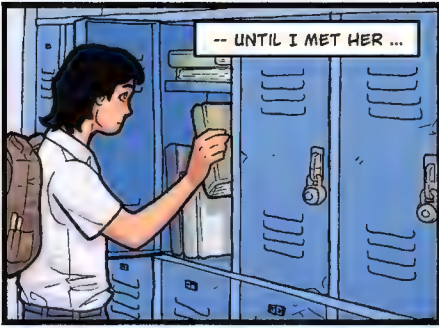


MIAMI BEACH WAS STILL IN ITS RUN-DOWN ERA. IT'D BEEN A WHILE SINCE THE GLORY DAYS OF THE 50'S, AND WE HADN'T YET REACHED THE POST-"MIAMI VICE" SOUTH BEACH RENAISSANCE.

THE STREETS WERE DIRTY. BUMS EVERYWHERE. BUT I DIDN'T CARE.









SHE WAS DIFFERENT FROM ALL OF THE OTHER GIRLS. SHE SAW THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY, LIKE SOME GRAND, FANTASTIC ILLUSION THAT WE COULD ALL CONQUER IN OUR OWN WAY.



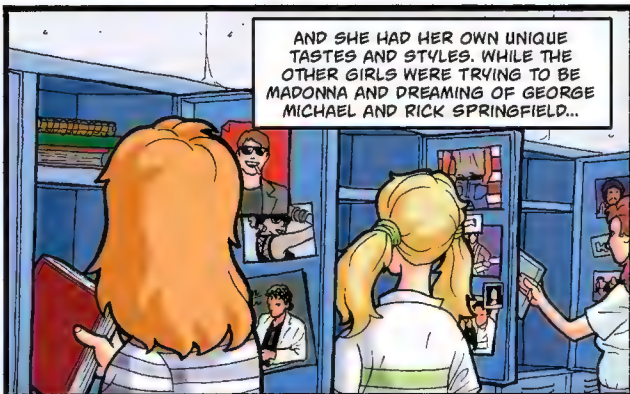
SHE STOOD UP FOR WHAT SHE BELIEVED IN, NO MATTER THE COST.

I'M SORRY, BUT THIS ASSIGNMENT IS IRRATIONAL, UNJUSTIFIED AND INHUMANE.

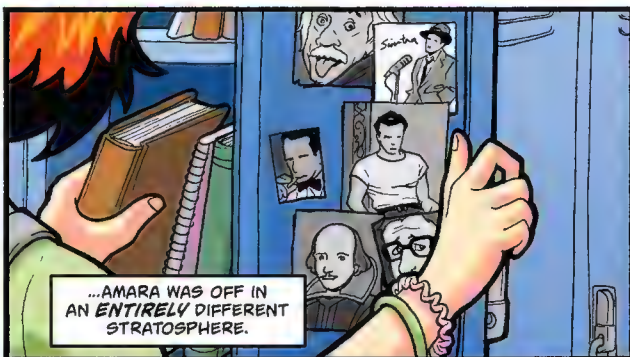
WE CAN LEARN JUST AS MUCH FROM LOOKING AT A PICTURE OF THE INSIDE OF A FETAL PIG, WE DON'T NEED TO ACTUALLY CUT THEM OPEN. THESE 20 BABY ANIMALS DIDN'T NEED TO DIE!

AND DID YOU KNOW THAT FORMALDEHYDE'S A CARCINOGEN?

SEND ME TO THE PRINCIPAL IF YOU WANT, BUT THIS RAMPANT SWINE BUTCHERY MUST STOP HERE AND NOW!



AND SHE HAD HER OWN UNIQUE TASTES AND STYLES, WHILE THE OTHER GIRLS WERE TRYING TO BE MADONNA AND DREAMING OF GEORGE MICHAEL AND RICK SPRINGFIELD...



...AMARA WAS OFF IN AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT STRATOSPHERE.



LUCKILY, WE GOT PAIRED UP TOGETHER ON A LAB PROJECT. WHAT STARTED OUT AS WORK TURNED INTO A FRIENDSHIP.

THE FIRST TIME SHE CALLED ME, WE WERE ON THE PHONE NON-STOP FOR 8 HOURS AND 37 MINUTES (NOT THAT I WAS COUNTING, OF COURSE).

I WAS IN HEAVEN.



I DON'T THINK YOU EVER AGAIN FEEL ANYTHING AS INTENSELY AS YOU DO IN JUNIOR HIGH. EVERY MOMENT, EVERY WORD IS LIFE OR DEATH, STANDING ON THE PRECIPICE OF SUCCESS OR DISASTER.

AND, MAN, DID I EVER FALL HARD.

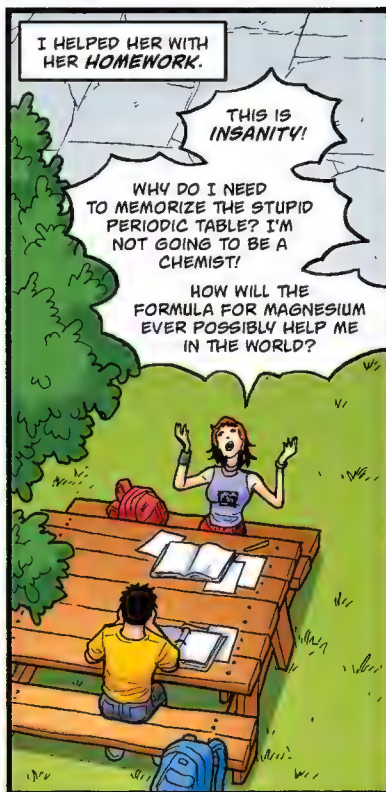


AMARA WASN'T JUST SOME SCHOOLBOY CRUSH ON THE GIRL OF THE WEEK - THIS ONE LASTED. CALL IT RIDICULOUS, CALL IT PATHETIC, BUT I DID EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO GET HER ATTENTION.

IN HIGH SCHOOL, I JOINED THE BASEBALL TEAM TO IMPRESS HER.



I JOINED THE **DRAMA** CLUB TO BE NEAR HER.

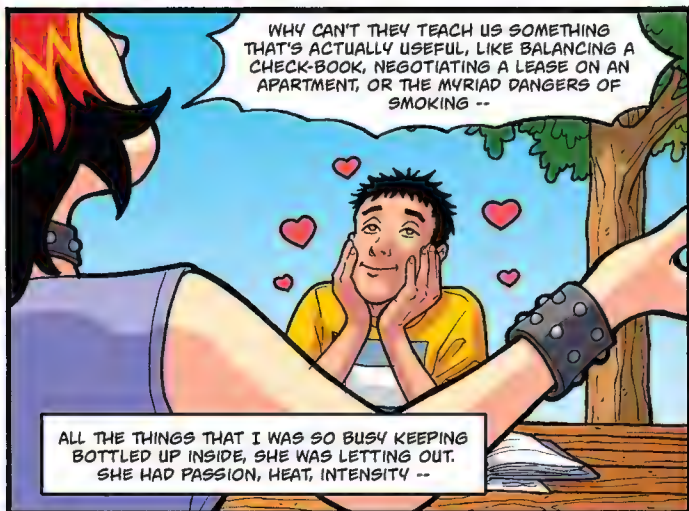


I HELPED HER WITH HER HOMEWORK.

THIS IS INSANITY!

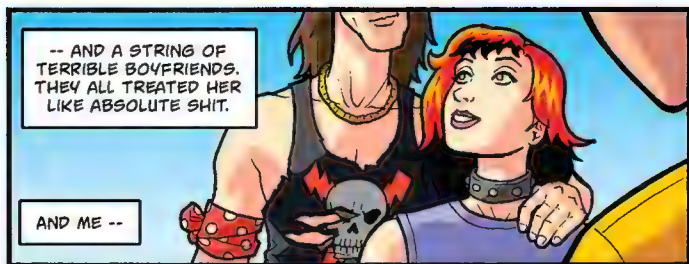
WHY DO I NEED TO MEMORIZE THE STUPID PERIODIC TABLE? I'M NOT GOING TO BE A CHEMIST!

HOW WILL THE FORMULA FOR MAGNESIUM EVER POSSIBLY HELP ME IN THE WORLD?



WHY CAN'T THEY TEACH US SOMETHING THAT'S ACTUALLY USEFUL, LIKE BALANCING A CHECK-BOOK, NEGOTIATING A LEASE ON AN APARTMENT, OR THE MYRIAD DANGERS OF SMOKING --

ALL THE THINGS THAT I WAS SO BUSY KEEPING BOTTLED UP INSIDE, SHE WAS LETTING OUT. SHE HAD PASSION, HEAT, INTENSITY --



-- AND A STRING OF TERRIBLE BOYFRIENDS. THEY ALL TREATED HER LIKE ABSOLUTE SHIT.

AND ME --

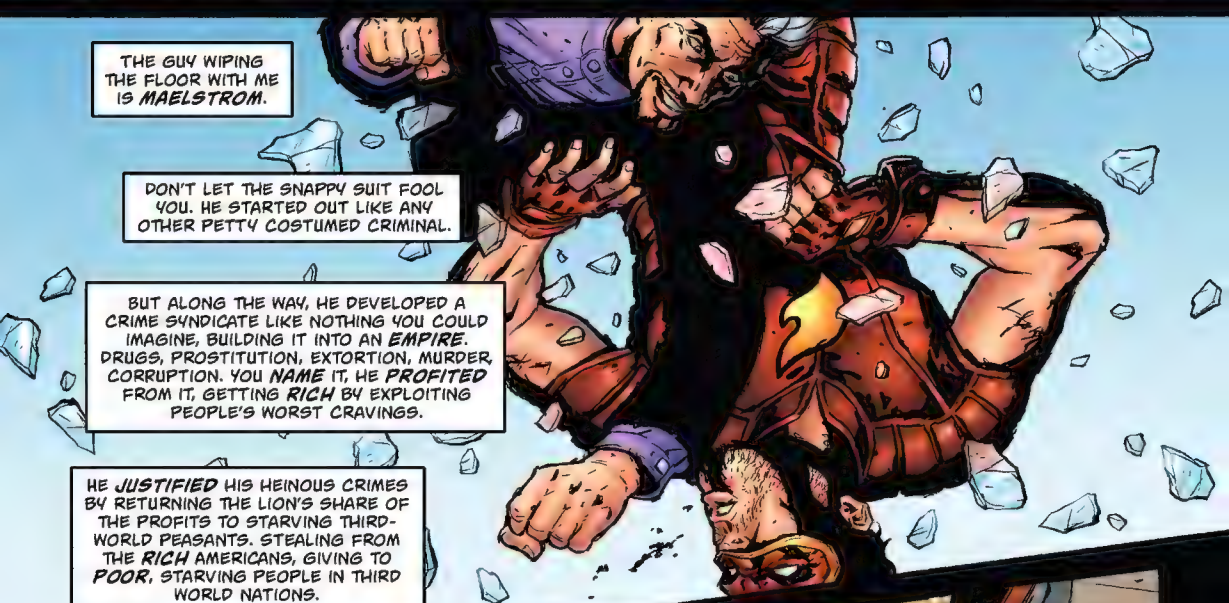


I WAS JUST A "FRIEND" - THE ABSOLUTE **WORST** WORD A TEENAGE GUY COULD EVER HEAR.

WE WERE BEST FRIENDS. INSEPARABLE, REALLY. BUT STILL FAR FROM WHAT I DREAMED IT SHOULD BE.



AND THEN THERE'S
THE **OTHER** END OF
THE SPECTRUM.



THE GUY WIPING
THE FLOOR WITH ME
IS **MAELSTROM**.

DON'T LET THE SNAPPY SUIT FOOL
YOU. HE STARTED OUT LIKE ANY
OTHER PETTY COSTUMED CRIMINAL.

BUT ALONG THE WAY, HE DEVELOPED A
CRIME SYNDICATE LIKE NOTHING YOU COULD
IMAGINE, BUILDING IT INTO AN **EMPIRE**.
DRUGS, PROSTITUTION, EXTORTION, MURDER,
CORRUPTION. YOU **NAME** IT, HE **PROFITED**
FROM IT, GETTING **RICH** BY EXPLOITING
PEOPLE'S WORST CRAVINGS.

HE **JUSTIFIED** HIS HEINOUS CRIMES
BY RETURNING THE LION'S SHARE OF
THE PROFITS TO STARVING THIRD-
WORLD PEASANTS. STEALING FROM
THE **RICH** AMERICANS, GIVING TO
POOR, STARVING PEOPLE IN THIRD
WORLD NATIONS.

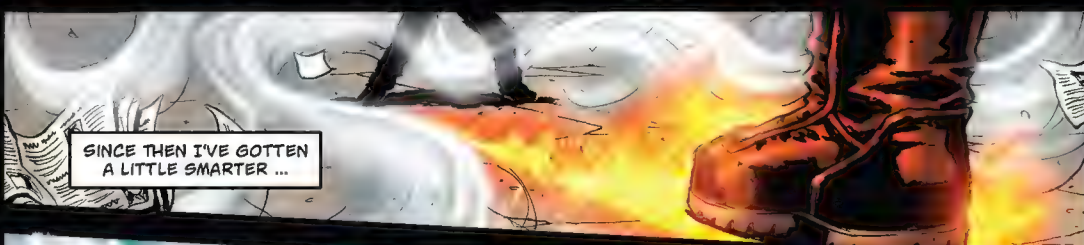


SORTA A SICK,
TWISTED ROBIN
HOOD.

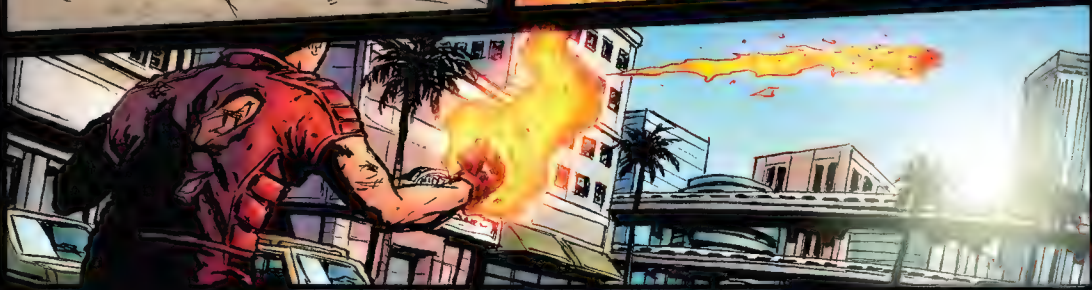
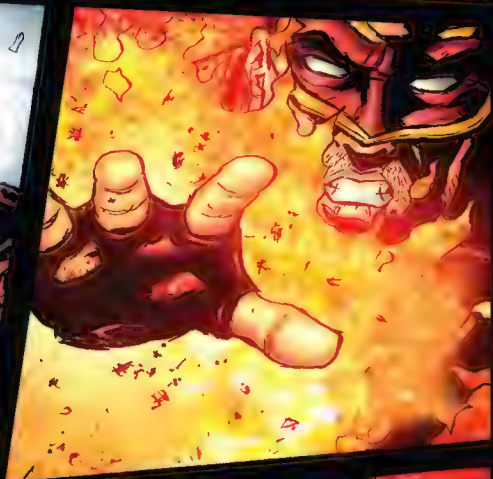
WE'VE FOUGHT DOZENS OF TIMES
AND HE'S **ALWAYS** GOTTEN THE
BETTER OF ME. I GUESS YOU COULD
SAY HE'S MY **ARCH-NEMESIS**.



THE FIRST TIME WE
FOUGHT, HE BEAT ME
SENSELESS, BLOWING ME
OUT LIKE A CHILD
BLOWING THE FLAME OFF
A BIRTHDAY CANDLE.



SINCE THEN I'VE GOTTEN
A LITTLE SMARTER ...





OF COURSE I WAS ALWAYS STRONG.

PHYSICALLY, ANYWAY.

STRENGTH OF WILL IS WHERE I CRUMBED.



AND AMARA WAS A BRUTAL REMINDER OF THAT EVERY DAY.

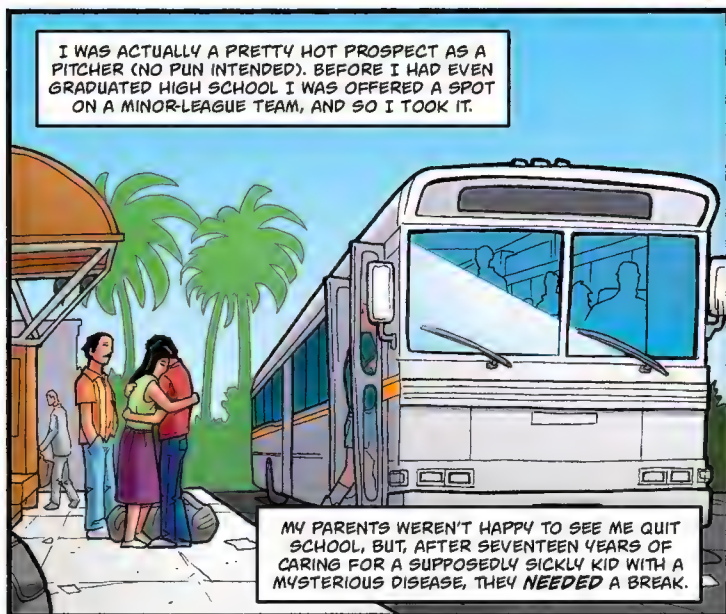
NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRIED, I NEVER COULD GET UP THE NERVE TO OPEN UP TO HER, TO TELL HER HOW I FELT. AND IT MADE HIGH SCHOOL A LIVING HELL FOR ME.



SEEING HER WITH GUYS WHO CLEARLY DIDN'T DESERVE HER, BEING AROUND HER EVERY DAY AND NOT BEING ABLE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. IT GOT TO A POINT WHERE I COULDN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE.

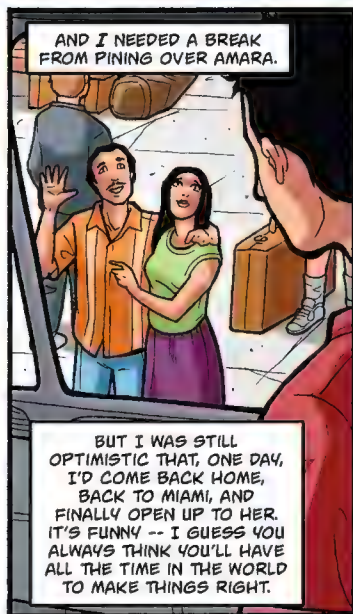
IT'S FUNNY -- NOWADAYS, I CAN FEARLESSLY STAND TOE-TO-TOE WITH SNARLING BEASTS HELL-BENT ON TEARING ME APART. BUT BACK THEN, I COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO OPEN UP TO THE GIRL I LOVED.

SO I LEFT. I WALKED AWAY.



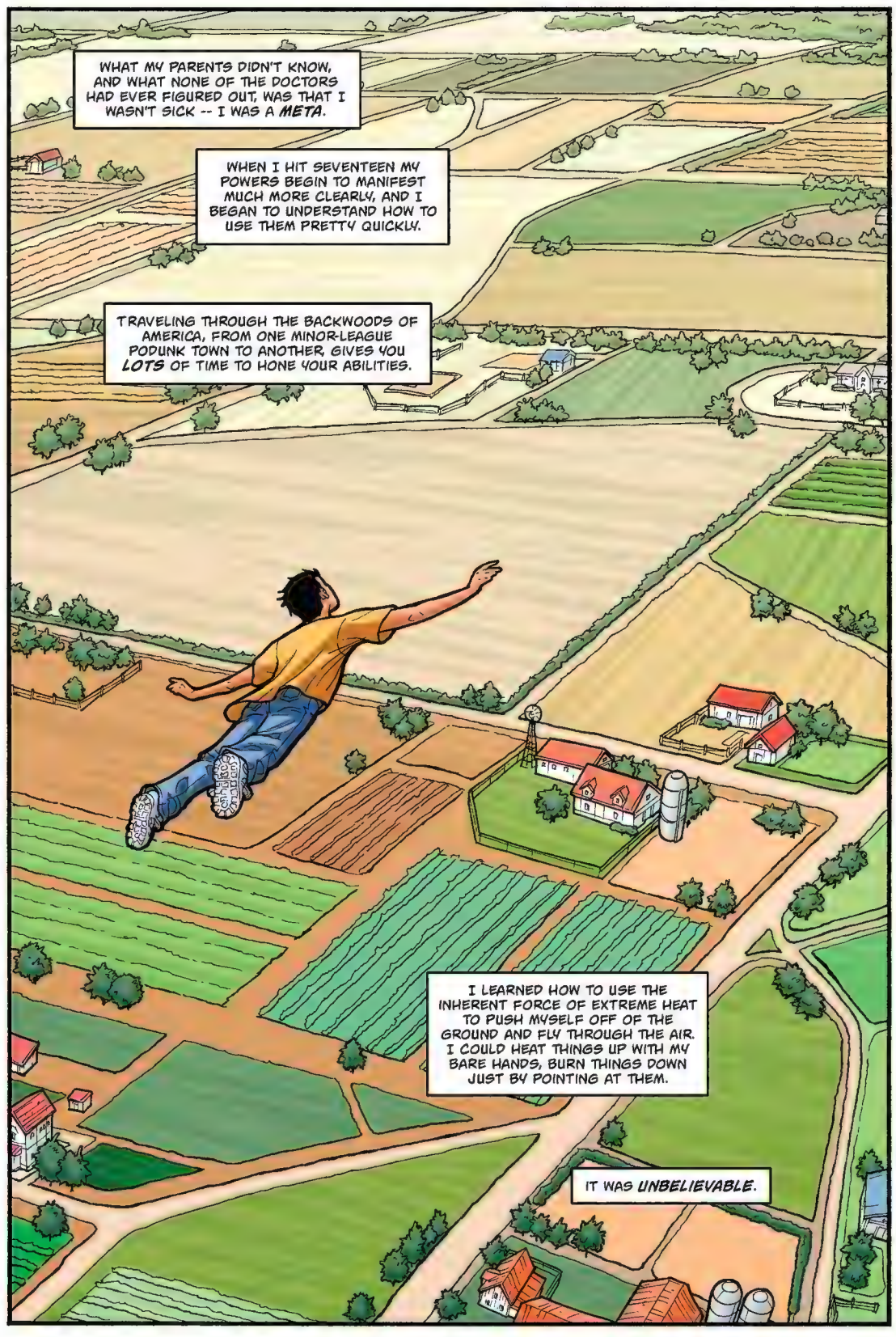
I WAS ACTUALLY A PRETTY HOT PROSPECT AS A PITCHER (NO PUN INTENDED). BEFORE I HAD EVEN GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL I WAS OFFERED A SPOT ON A MINOR-LEAGUE TEAM, AND SO I TOOK IT.

MY PARENTS WEREN'T HAPPY TO SEE ME QUIT SCHOOL, BUT, AFTER SEVENTEEN YEARS OF CARING FOR A SUPPOSEDLY SICKLY KID WITH A MYSTERIOUS DISEASE, THEY NEEDED A BREAK.



AND I NEEDED A BREAK FROM PINING OVER AMARA.

BUT I WAS STILL OPTIMISTIC THAT, ONE DAY, I'D COME BACK HOME, BACK TO MIAMI, AND FINALLY OPEN UP TO HER. IT'S FUNNY -- I GUESS YOU ALWAYS THINK YOU'LL HAVE ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT.

A young man with dark hair, wearing a yellow t-shirt and blue jeans, is shown from behind, flying horizontally through the air. His arms are outstretched forward, and his legs are slightly bent. Below him is a detailed rural landscape with green fields, brown dirt roads, and several farmhouses with red roofs. There are also some trees and a windmill visible. The scene is depicted in a comic book style with bold outlines and flat colors.

WHAT MY PARENTS DIDN'T KNOW,
AND WHAT NONE OF THE DOCTORS
HAD EVER FIGURED OUT, WAS THAT I
WASN'T SICK -- I WAS A *META*.

WHEN I HIT SEVENTEEN MY
POWERS BEGIN TO MANIFEST
MUCH MORE CLEARLY, AND I
BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO
USE THEM PRETTY QUICKLY.

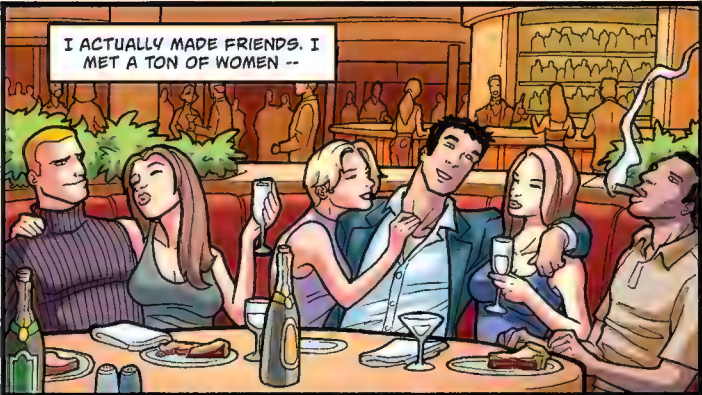
TRAVELING THROUGH THE BACKWOODS OF
AMERICA, FROM ONE MINOR-LEAGUE
PODUNK TOWN TO ANOTHER, GIVES YOU
LOTS OF TIME TO HONE YOUR ABILITIES.

I LEARNED HOW TO USE THE
INHERENT FORCE OF EXTREME HEAT
TO PUSH MYSELF OFF OF THE
GROUND AND FLY THROUGH THE AIR.
I COULD HEAT THINGS UP WITH MY
BARE HANDS, BURN THINGS DOWN
JUST BY POINTING AT THEM.

IT WAS *UNBELIEVABLE*.



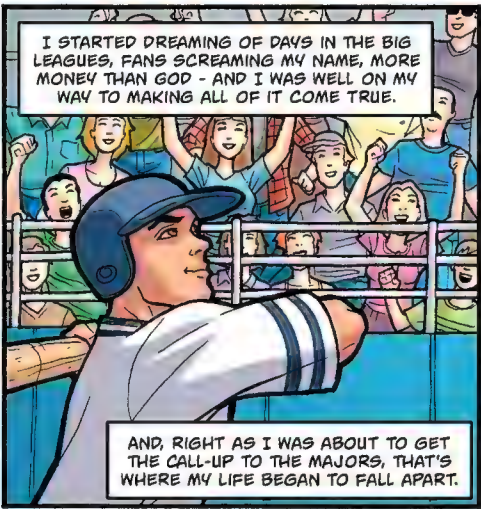
I WAS HAVING A **BLAST**. WE WERE WINNING, I WAS GETTING TONS OF ATTENTION. I WAS YOUNG, FREE, A **SUPERSTAR** IN THE MAKING.



I ACTUALLY MADE FRIENDS. I MET A TON OF WOMEN --



BUT NONE OF THEM COULD COMPARE TO **AMARA**.



I STARTED DREAMING OF DAYS IN THE BIG LEAGUES, FANS SCREAMING MY NAME, MORE MONEY THAN GOD - AND I WAS WELL ON MY WAY TO MAKING ALL OF IT COME TRUE.

AND, RIGHT AS I WAS ABOUT TO GET THE CALL-UP TO THE MAJORS, THAT'S WHERE MY LIFE BEGAN TO FALL APART.



The Podunk Gazette

Topeka Tigers Have Super-Powered Pitcher Putting **TOO MUCH** Heat on the Ball?

MY **POWERS** WERE DISCOVERED.

EVEN THOUGH I WOULD NEVER **DREAM** OF INTENTIONALLY USING THEM IN A GAME, THE LEAGUE DIDN'T CARE.



SO I GOT THE BOOT. THE **ONE** GOOD THING I HAD IN MY LIFE AND I HAD IT **RIPPED** FROM ME BECAUSE OF MY STUPID SUPER POWERS.



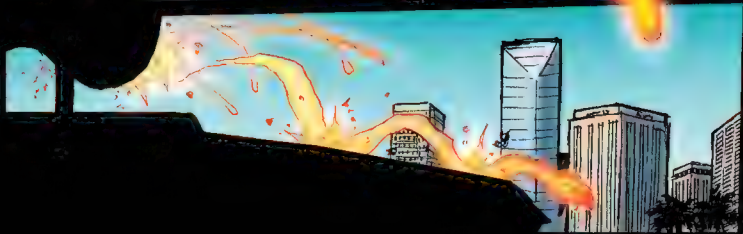
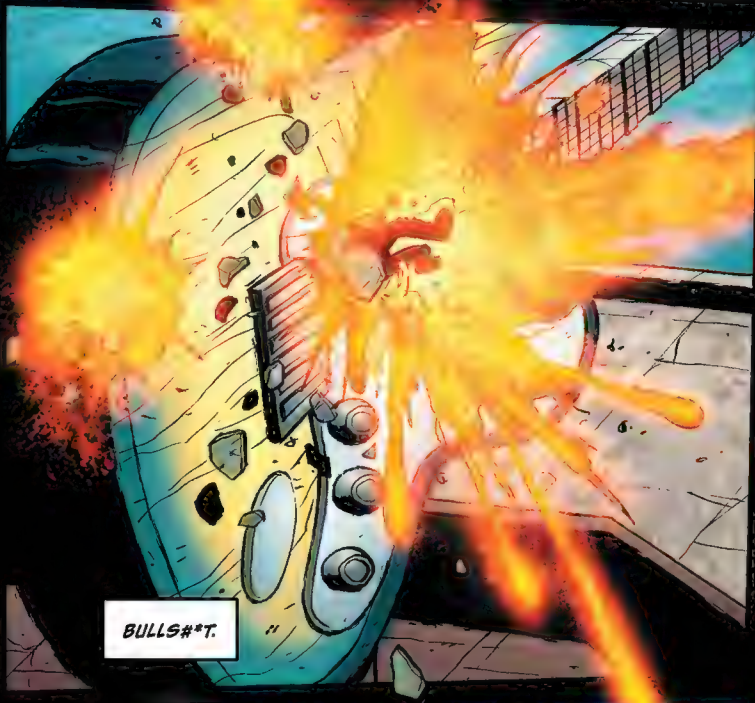
IT'D BE NICE TO BE WITHOUT
'EM, JUST FOR A DAY.

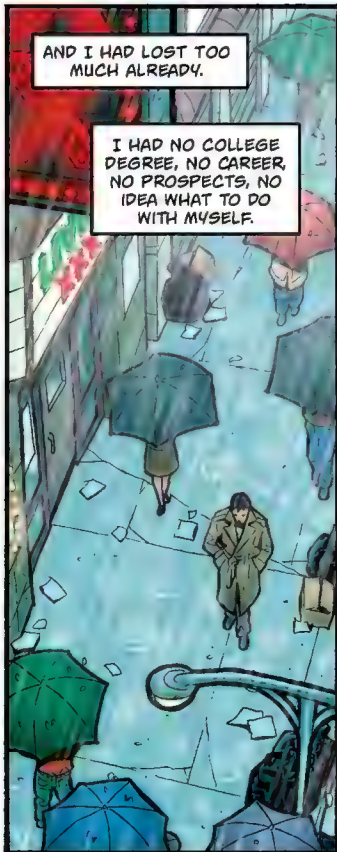


MAYBE THEN I WOULDN'T HAVE TO
BE HERE, WEARING A RIDICULOUS
LEATHER COSTUME IN THE MIDDLE
OF AUGUST IN MIAMI, FIGHTING FOR
MY LIFE - IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.



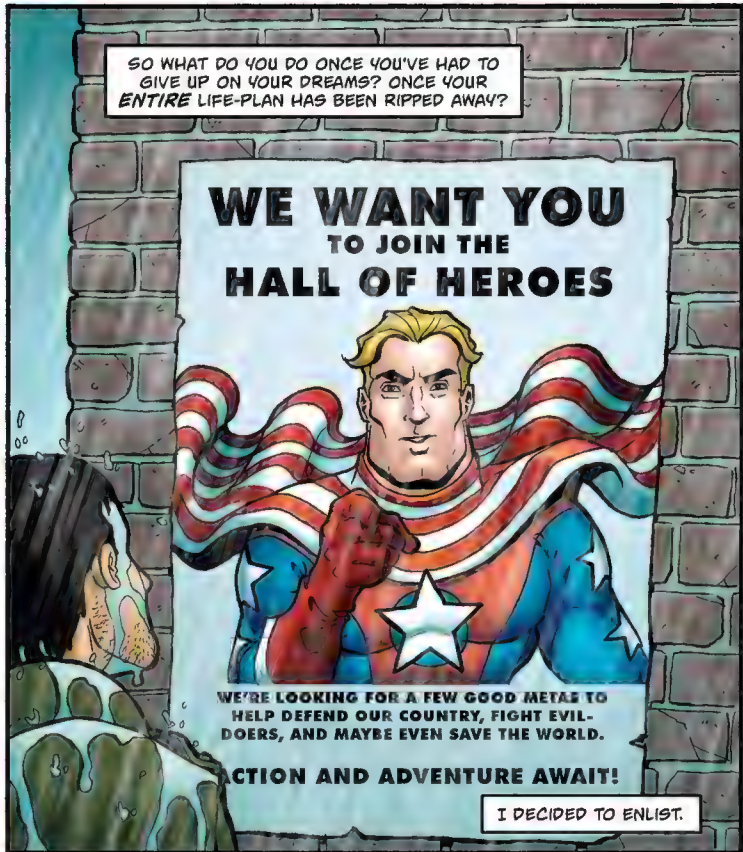
IT'S NOT ALWAYS AS
EASY AS IT LOOKS.





AND I HAD LOST TOO MUCH ALREADY.

I HAD NO COLLEGE DEGREE, NO CAREER, NO PROSPECTS, NO IDEA WHAT TO DO WITH MYSELF.



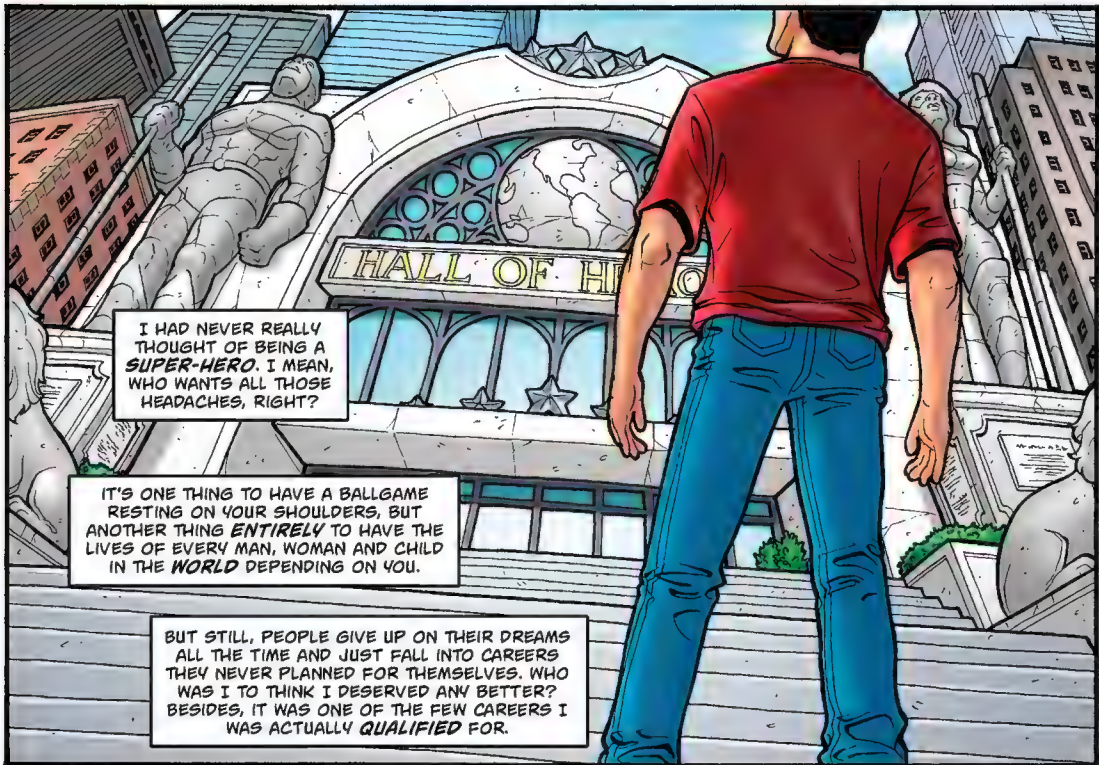
SO WHAT DO YOU DO ONCE YOU'VE HAD TO GIVE UP ON YOUR DREAMS? ONCE YOUR ENTIRE LIFE-PLAN HAS BEEN RIPPED AWAY?

**WE WANT YOU
TO JOIN THE
HALL OF HEROES**

WE'RE LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD METAS TO HELP DEFEND OUR COUNTRY, FIGHT EVIL-DOERS, AND MAYBE EVEN SAVE THE WORLD.

ACTION AND ADVENTURE AWAIT!

I DECIDED TO ENLIST.

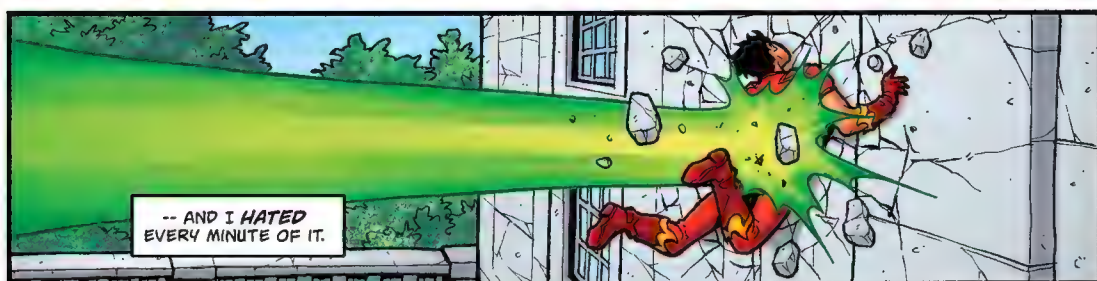


I HAD NEVER REALLY THOUGHT OF BEING A **SUPER-HERO**. I MEAN, WHO WANTS ALL THOSE HEADACHES, RIGHT?

IT'S ONE THING TO HAVE A BALLGAME RESTING ON YOUR SHOULDERS, BUT ANOTHER THING **ENTIRELY** TO HAVE THE LIVES OF EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD IN THE **WORLD** DEPENDING ON YOU.

BUT STILL, PEOPLE GIVE UP ON THEIR DREAMS ALL THE TIME AND JUST FALL INTO CAREERS THEY NEVER PLANNED FOR THEMSELVES. WHO WAS I TO THINK I DESERVED ANY BETTER? BESIDES, IT WAS ONE OF THE FEW CAREERS I WAS ACTUALLY **QUALIFIED** FOR.







TO ADD INSULT TO (LITERAL) INJURY, I WAS BERATED AND DEMEANED BY MY TEAMMATES.

NOT AT ALL WHAT I HAD EXPECTED.

NOT AT ALL WHAT *ANYONE* WOULD EXPECT FROM A GROUP OF SUPPOSED HEROES.



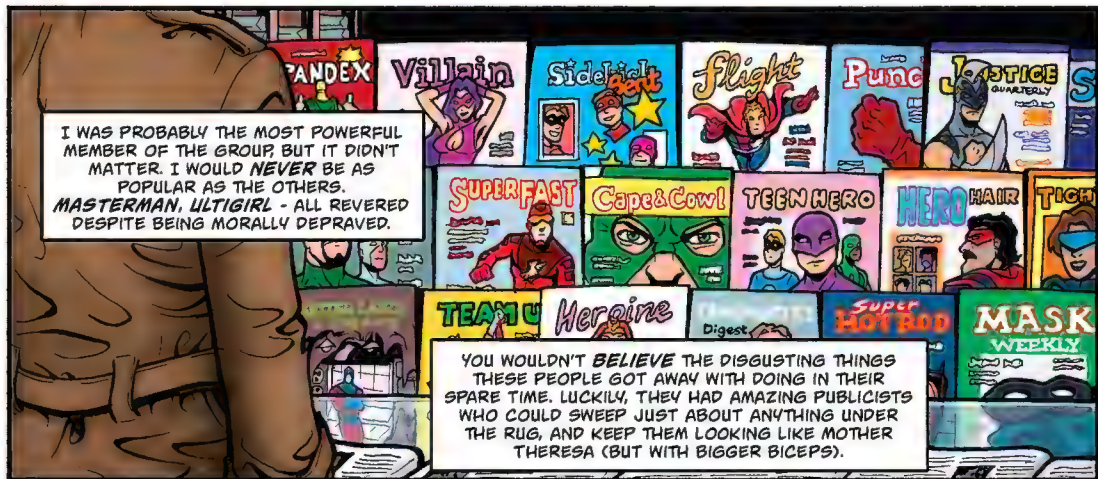
AND THE MEDIA CONSTANTLY ATTACKED ME. INSTEAD OF APPLAUDING ME FOR ALL THE KIDS I'D *SAVED*, THEY *SAVAGED* ME WHEN A KID I'D NEVER EVEN MET SET HIMSELF ON FIRE TO BE LIKE THE FLARE...



...OR WHEN AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD GIRL THREW HERSELF OUT OF A 30TH FLOOR WINDOW TO TRY AND FLY LIKE ME.



THEY MADE ME THE BUTT OF ENDLESS JOKES OVER MY INABILITY TO BEAT MAELSTROM ONCE AND FOR ALL.

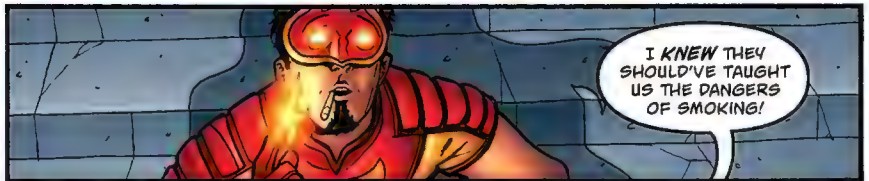
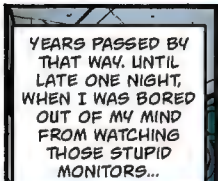
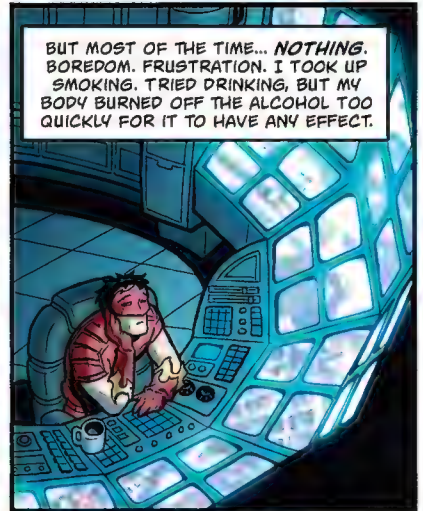
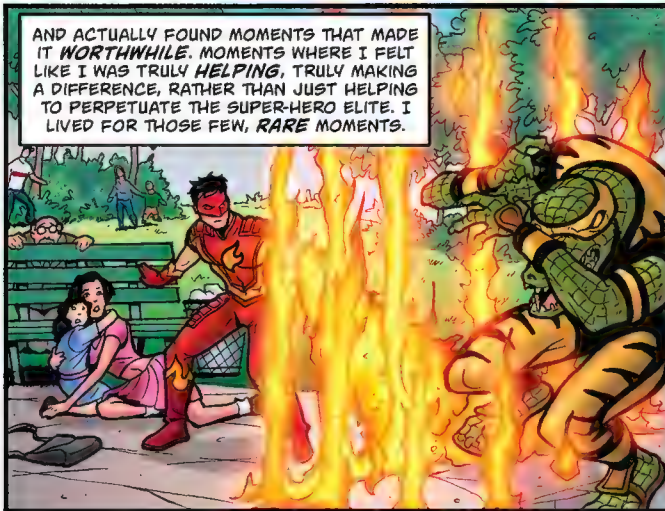


I WAS PROBABLY THE MOST POWERFUL MEMBER OF THE GROUP, BUT IT DIDN'T MATTER. I WOULD *NEVER* BE AS POPULAR AS THE OTHERS. *MASTERMAN, ULTIGIRL* - ALL REVERED DESPITE BEING MORALLY DEPRAVED.

YOU WOULDN'T *BELIEVE* THE DISGUSTING THINGS THESE PEOPLE GOT AWAY WITH DOING IN THEIR SPARE TIME. LUCKILY, THEY HAD AMAZING PUBLICISTS WHO COULD SWEEP JUST ABOUT ANYTHING UNDER THE RUG, AND KEEP THEM LOOKING LIKE MOTHER THERESA (BUT WITH BIGGER BICEPS).



I PROBABLY SHOULD'VE QUIT, BUT IT'S NOT LIKE I HAD A LOT OF OPTIONS. SO I JUST SUCKED IT UP AND KEPT IT BOTTLED UP INSIDE. I DID THE BEST JOB I POSSIBLY COULD, WORKED HARD, TRIED TO TAKE PRIDE IN MY EFFORTS.



I NAIVELY THOUGHT THE COSTUME AND MASK WOULD KEEP MY IDENTITY SECRET FROM THE PUBLIC. BUT AMARA KNEW ME TOO WELL. FROM THE FIRST BIT OF NEWS FOOTAGE, SHE SAW **RIGHT** THROUGH THE FACADE.

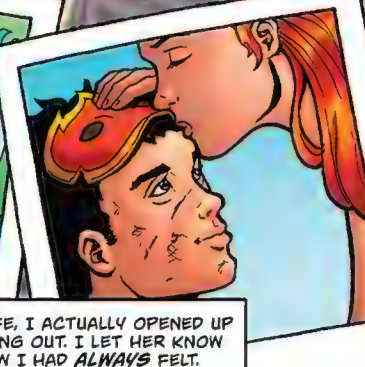
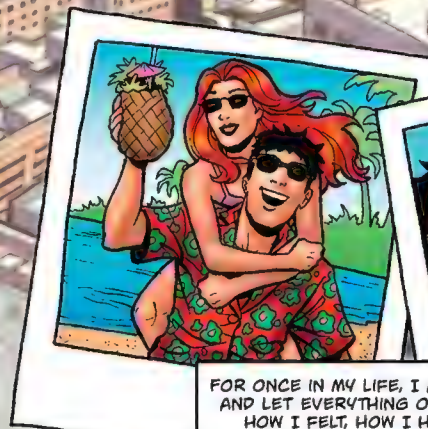
SHE WAS STUDYING ADVERTISING AT A SCHOOL IN NEW YORK, FOLLOWING MY EXPLOITS IN THE NEWS THE WHOLE TIME. NO MATTER HOW BAD THE PRESS HAD BEEN, SHE DIDN'T CARE. SHE **NEVER** BELIEVED THE **BAD** STUFF.

SHE HAD WAITED OUTSIDE THE HALL OF HEROES FOR A LONG TIME, AFRAID I MIGHT NOT REMEMBER HER WHEN I SAW HER. SHE ACTUALLY THOUGHT THAT, AFTER SPENDING SO MUCH TIME AMONG HEROES, AND ALIENS AND GODS, I MIGHT HAVE GOTTEN TOO **BIG** TO SPEND TIME WITH THE "LITTLE PEOPLE". BUT, FINALLY, SHE CAME UP TO SEE ME.

AND THINGS WERE **DIFFERENT** THIS TIME. WE WERE A LITTLE OLDER. AND A LITTLE WISER.

AND THERE WAS NO SKANKY BOYFRIEND.

WE SPENT A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER, GETTING RE-ACQUAINTED. SHE WAS EXACTLY AS I REMEMBERED HER: WILD AND UNINHIBITED AND FULL OF LIFE. JUST BEING **AROUND** HER MADE ME FEEL LIKE A BETTER MAN.



FOR ONCE IN MY LIFE, I ACTUALLY OPENED UP AND LET EVERYTHING OUT. I LET HER KNOW HOW I FELT, HOW I HAD **ALWAYS** FELT.

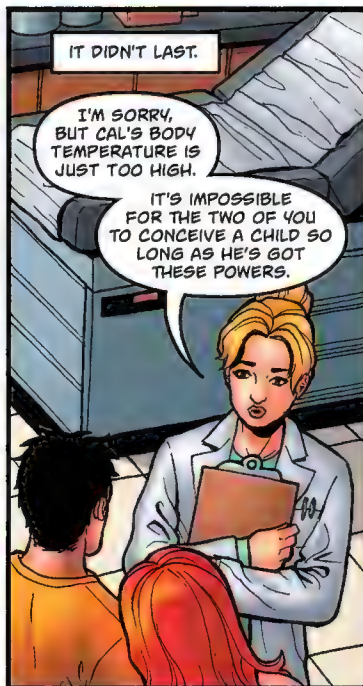


AND THIS TIME, WE FELL FOR **EACH OTHER**.



WE MOVED BACK TO MIAMI, TO BEGIN OUR LIVES TOGETHER.

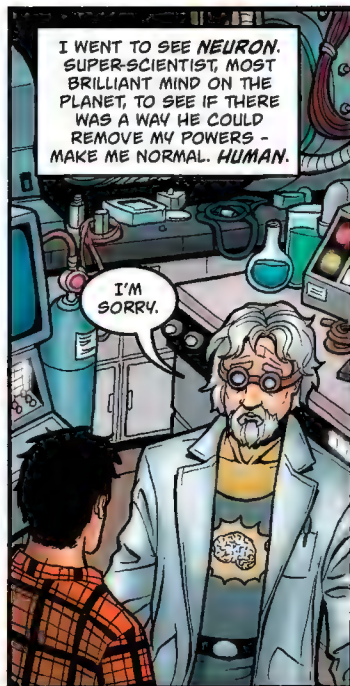
IT WAS **MAGICAL**, EVERYTHING I HAD EVER WANTED OUT OF LIFE.



IT DIDN'T LAST.

I'M SORRY, BUT CAL'S BODY TEMPERATURE IS JUST TOO HIGH.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE TWO OF YOU TO CONCEIVE A CHILD SO LONG AS HE'S GOT THESE POWERS.



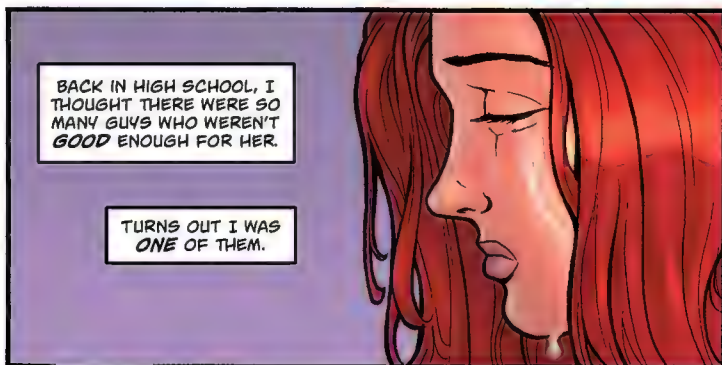
I WENT TO SEE **NEURON**. SUPER-SCIENTIST, MOST BRILLIANT MIND ON THE PLANET, TO SEE IF THERE WAS A WAY HE COULD REMOVE MY POWERS - MAKE ME **NORMAL. HUMAN.**

I'M SORRY.



SHE WANTED A CHILD MORE THAN **ANYTHING** IN THE WORLD. WE TALKED ABOUT ADOPTING, WE TALKED ABOUT OTHER OPTIONS, BUT I KNEW THAT NONE OF THAT WAS WHAT SHE **REALLY** WANTED.

THINGS WENT DOWNHILL FROM THERE.



BACK IN HIGH SCHOOL, I THOUGHT THERE WERE SO MANY GUYS WHO WEREN'T **GOOD** ENOUGH FOR HER.

TURNS OUT I WAS **ONE** OF THEM.



AMARA DESERVED SO MUCH **MORE** THAN WHAT I WAS ABLE TO OFFER HER, SO MUCH MORE THAN THE INADEQUATE MAN I HAD GROWN TO BECOME.



SO, I LEFT.

FREED HER TO FIND A BETTER MAN, A BETTER LIFE.



THAT'S THE
PROBLEM WITH
GETTING TOO
CLOSE TO
SOMEONE. THE
PAIN CAN BE
UNBEARABLE...



...AND HERE I AM,
DOING IT AGAIN.



I SHOULDN'T
BE ENGAGING
MAELSTROM
THIS CLOSE IN.

STUPID.

LET HIM GET TO ME, LIKE AN
AMATEUR. FORGETTING
EVERYTHING I'VE LEARNED.



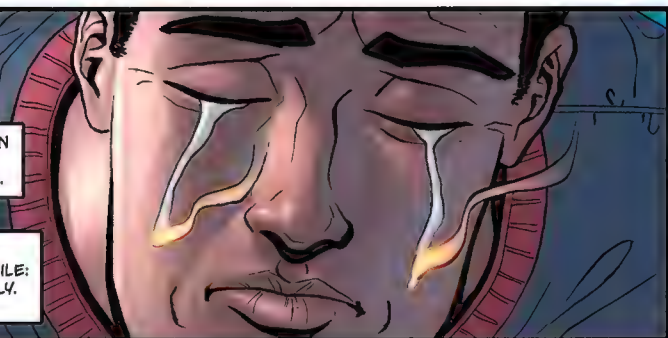
NEED TO GET SOME
DISTANCE TO USE
MY POWERS ... AND
AVOID HIS.

NEED TO GET AWAY...

WALKING AWAY FROM AMARA WAS THE HARDEST THING I'VE EVER HAD TO DO IN MY LIFE.

EVER HAD A DEMI-GOD PUNCH YOU IN THE GUT? IT KINDA **HURTS**. THIS HURT **WORSE**. MUCH, MUCH WORSE.

MY POWERS HAD NOW ROBBED ME OF **EVERYTHING** THAT MAKES LIFE WORTHWHILE: MY DREAMS, MY CAREER, MY WIFE, A FAMILY. ALL GONE, BURNT AWAY. **ASHES**.



OVER THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS MY POWERS GREW EXPONENTIALLY.



I HAD ALWAYS BEEN ABLE TO **CONTROL** FIRE, BUT NOW I COULD SENSE HEAT, **FEEL** IT, TO A DEGREE A HUNDRED TIMES MORE ACUTE THAN ANY HUMAN EVER COULD.

I GUESS IT HAD BEEN HAPPENING LITTLE BY LITTLE, GETTING STRONGER AND STRONGER OVER THE COURSE OF MY LIFE, BUT I HAD NEVER REALLY NOTICED IT UNTIL NOW. IT WAS ALL COMING TO A HEAD.

I WAS BECOMING A LIVING INFRA-RED RADAR, SENSING IMMEDIATELY THE PRESENCE OF **EVERY** LIVING THING AROUND ME. I COULD FEEL THE WARMTH GENERATED BY A HUMAN BODY, THE HEAT FROM A SINGLE LIGHT BULB, THE GLOW OF A SMALL HOUSE PLANT A MILE AWAY.

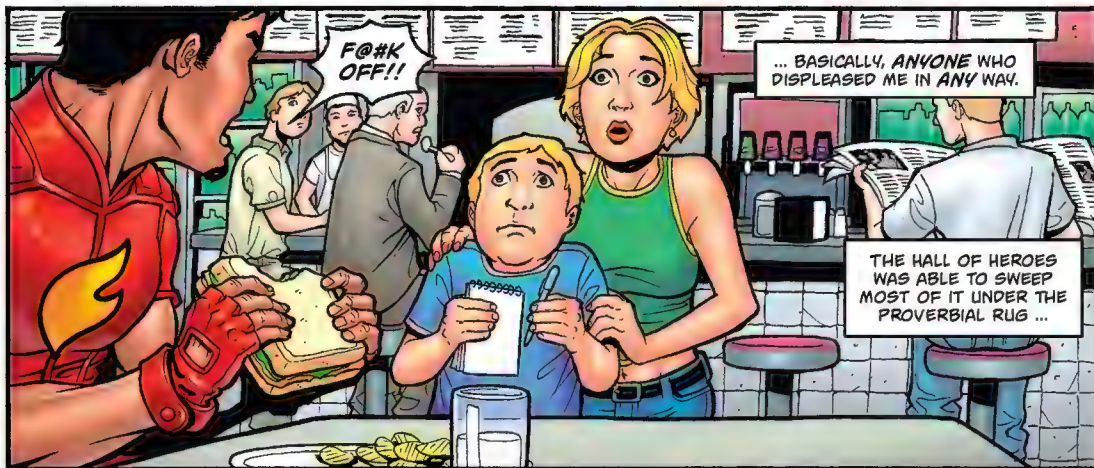


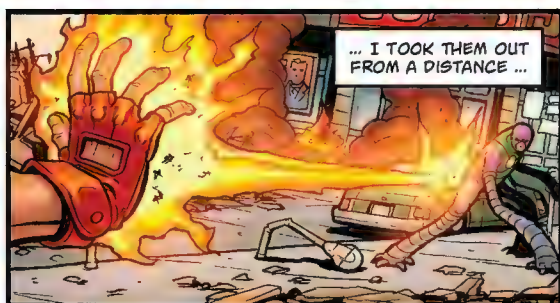
AND IT WAS BECOMING **WAY** TOO MUCH FOR ME.

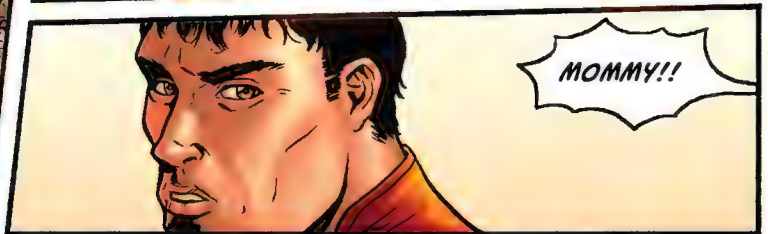
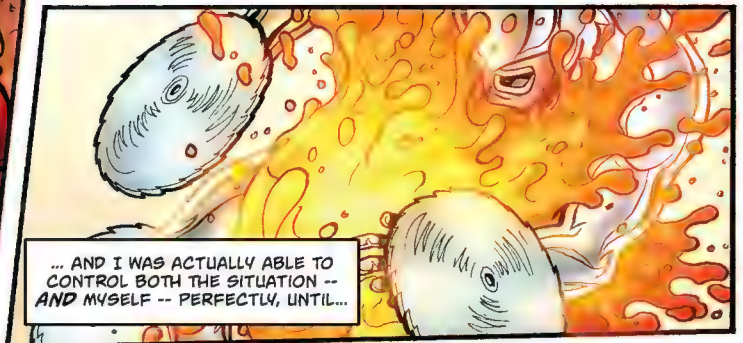
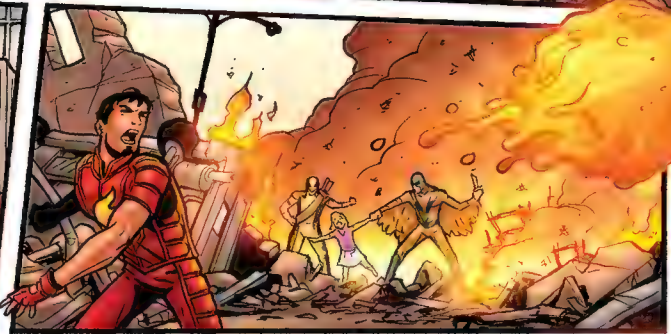


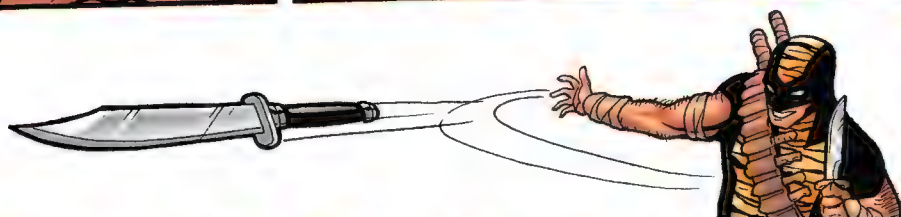
I SOUGHT NEURON'S HELP MORE AND MORE, AND HE DESIGNED MORE POWERFUL SUITS TO MODERATE MY INCREASING POWERS AND KEEP THEM UNDER CONTROL.

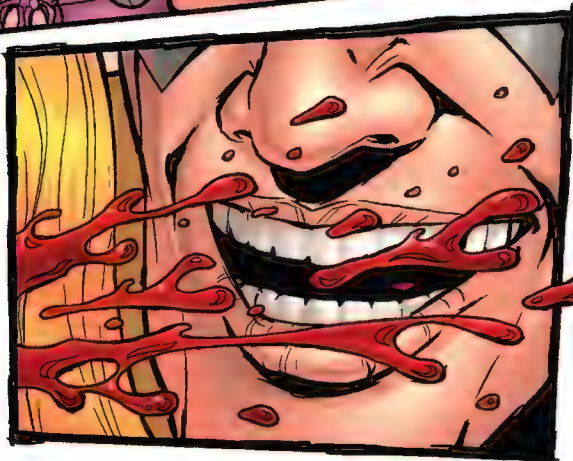
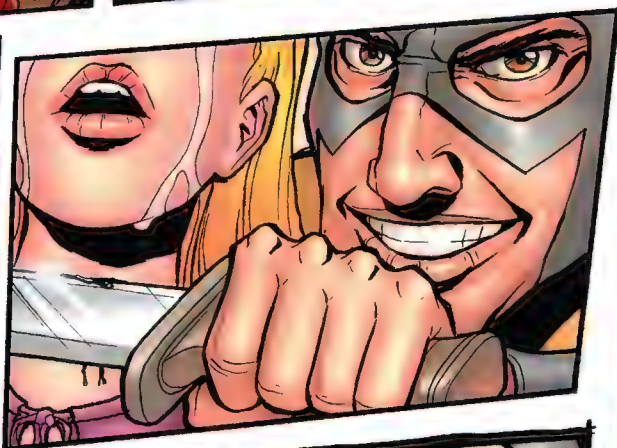
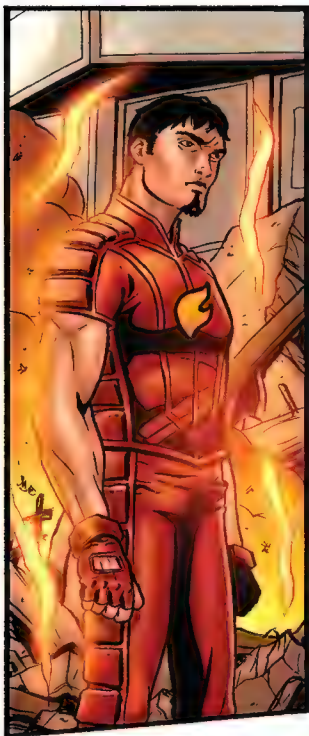
IT HELPED - A LITTLE - BUT, JUST AS I COULD SENSE MINOR HEAT FLUCTUATIONS IN **OTHERS**, I COULD FEEL MY **OWN** PATTERNS AS WELL, AND I KNEW THAT SOMETHING WAS - WELL - JUST WASN'T **RIGHT**.







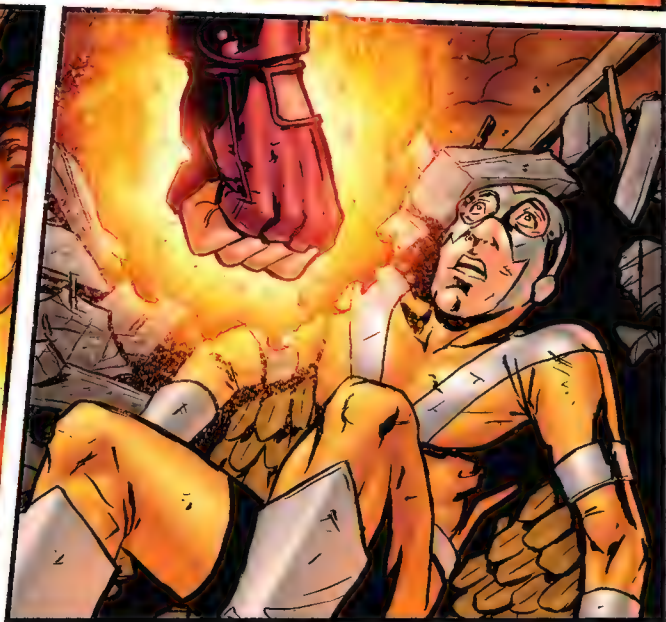




LIKE I SAID, I'M NO HERO.

A **TRUE** HERO WOULDN'T
LOSE CONTROL.

A HERO WOULDN'T
DO THESE THINGS.



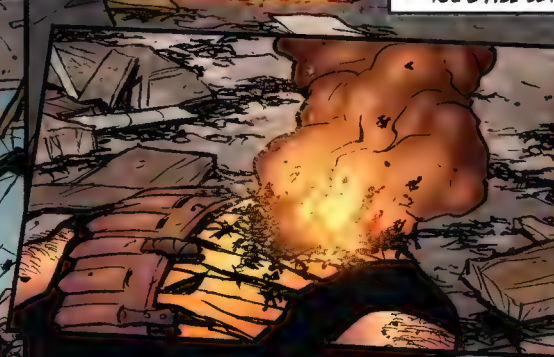




I WAS SUCH A GOOD KID. SO MANY DREAMS, SO MUCH IMAGINATION. I WAS GONNA BE A ROLE MODEL, A LOVING HUSBAND AND FATHER. ONE OF THE *GOOD* GUYS -

THIS ANGRY, BITTER GUY, IT ISN'T WHO I AM. NO MATTER HOW MANY BATTLES I'D BEEN IN, I'VE NEVER KILLED A MAN BEFORE - NEVER WOULD HAVE *DREAMED* OF KILLING ANYONE, BUT *NOW* --

HAVE YOU EVER HAD THAT - EVER JUST BEEN SO CAUGHT UP IN A MOMENT -- AND YOU *KNEW* IT WAS WRONG AND YOU *STILL* LET YOURSELF GET...?



SOMETHING WAS *SERIOUSLY* WRONG WITH ME.



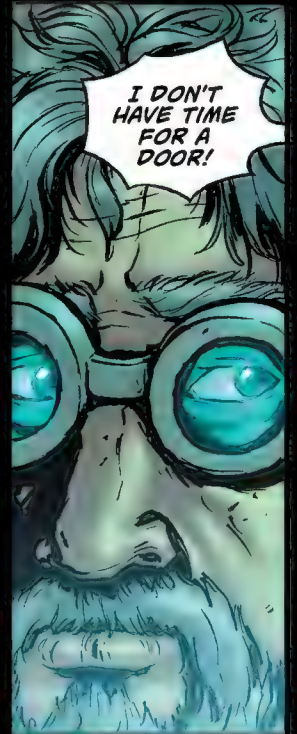


ALAN.



I NEED YOUR HELP.

YOU COULD'VE USED THE DOOR.



I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR A DOOR!

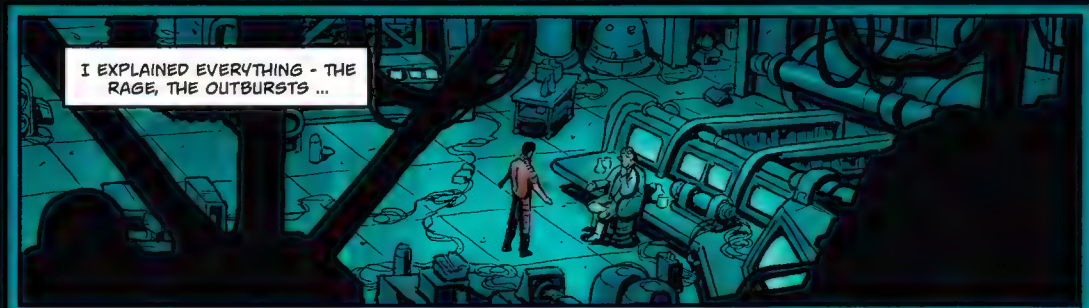


WELL. A LITTLE HOT UNDER THE COLLAR AREN'T WE?

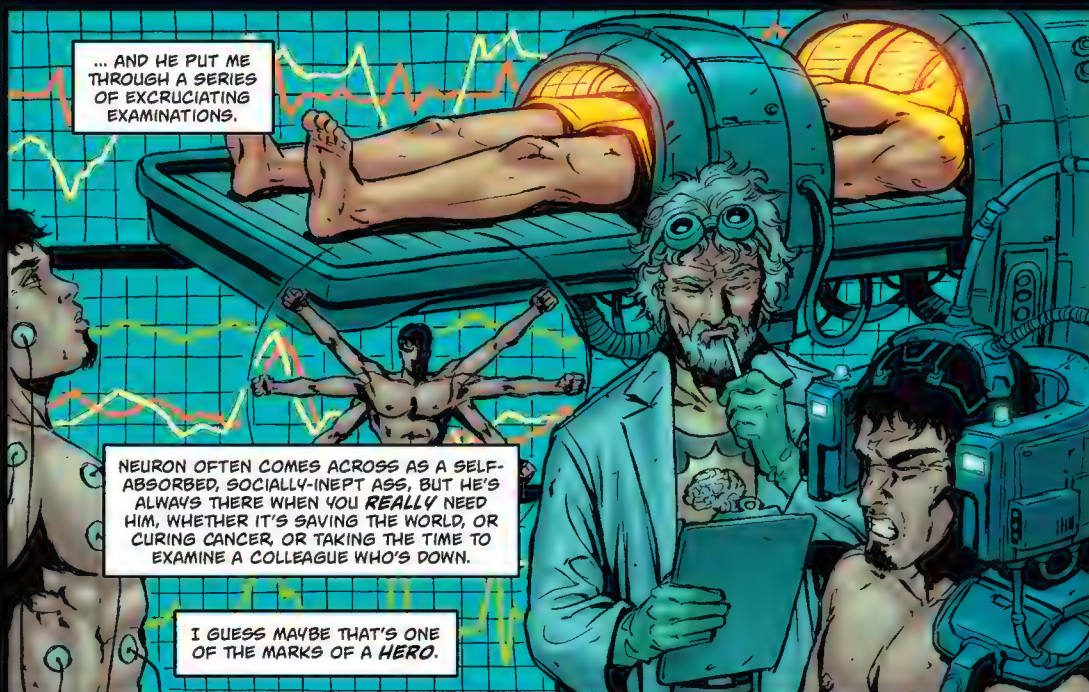


HEH. COME ON, THAT WAS FUNNY!

CAL, YOU'VE GOT NO SENSE OF HUMOR ANY MORE.



I EXPLAINED EVERYTHING - THE RAGE, THE OUTBURSTS ...



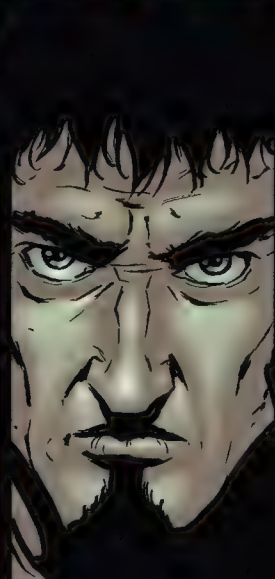
... AND HE PUT ME THROUGH A SERIES OF EXCRUCIATING EXAMINATIONS.

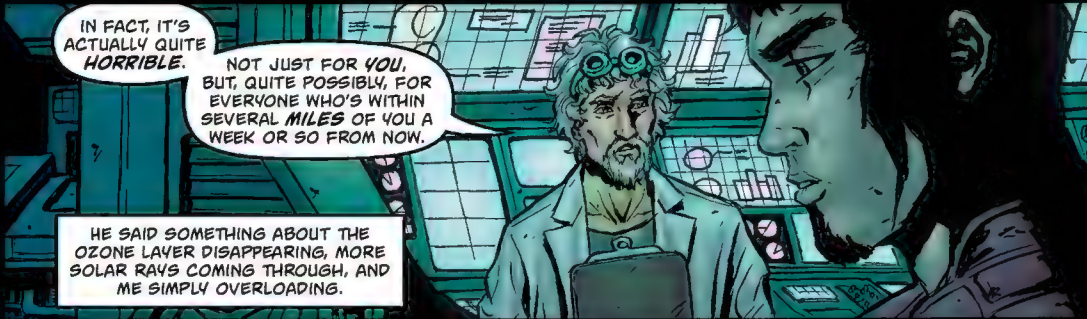
NEURON OFTEN COMES ACROSS AS A SELF-ABSORBED, SOCIALLY-INEPT ASS, BUT HE'S ALWAYS THERE WHEN YOU **REALLY** NEED HIM, WHETHER IT'S SAVING THE WORLD, OR CURING CANCER, OR TAKING THE TIME TO EXAMINE A COLLEAGUE WHO'S DOWN.

I GUESS MAYBE THAT'S ONE OF THE MARKS OF A HERO.



WELL, IT'S NOT GOOD.





IN FACT, IT'S ACTUALLY QUITE HORRIBLE.

NOT JUST FOR YOU, BUT, QUITE POSSIBLY, FOR EVERYONE WHO'S WITHIN SEVERAL MILES OF YOU A WEEK OR SO FROM NOW.

HE SAID SOMETHING ABOUT THE OZONE LAYER DISAPPEARING, MORE SOLAR RAYS COMING THROUGH, AND ME SIMPLY OVERLOADING.

YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN ABLE TO **DISCHARGE** WHATEVER ENERGY YOU'VE TAKEN IN, BUT NOW, YOU'RE **ABSORBING** IT FASTER THAN YOU CAN GET RID OF IT.

YOU SEE, AS YOU ADD HEAT TO ANY MATERIAL YOU ARE INCREASING THE DISORDER, OR **ENTROPY**, OF THAT SYSTEM. AS THAT ENTROPY INCREASES, THE ITEM IN QUESTION WILL GO FROM A SOLID TO A LIQUID, OR MORE **DRAMATICALLY**, A LIQUID TO A GAS.

YOUR CASE IS ... WELL ... IT'S VERY **INTERESTING**. YOUR BODY IS REACHING A **CRITICAL** STATE. THE SOLAR ENERGY IN YOUR CELLS IS BUILDING AND BUILDING, TO THE POINT WHERE YOU'LL EITHER JUST **EXPLODE** OUTRIGHT, OR SIMPLY **MELT AWAY**, ONE CELL AT A TIME, INTO A SUPER-HEATED LIQUID OR GAS.

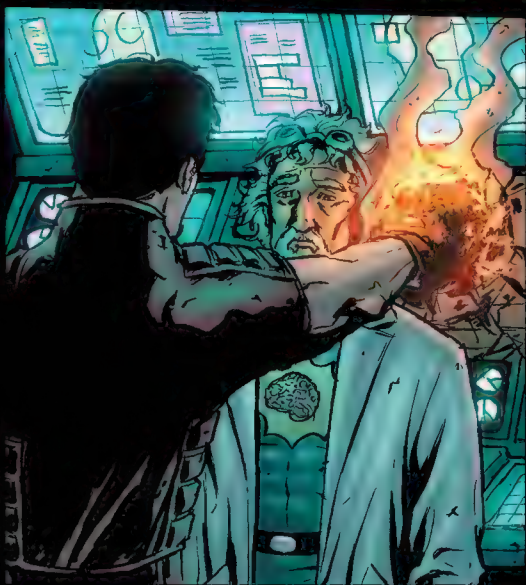
YOUR BODY COULD LIQUEFY FROM **INSIDE**, WHERE YOU'RE THE WARMEST, AND YOUR MELTED ORGANS WOULD BEGIN BLEEDING OUT THROUGH YOUR PORES, YOUR NOSTRILS, MOUTH, EYES -- ABSOLUTELY **AMAZING**!

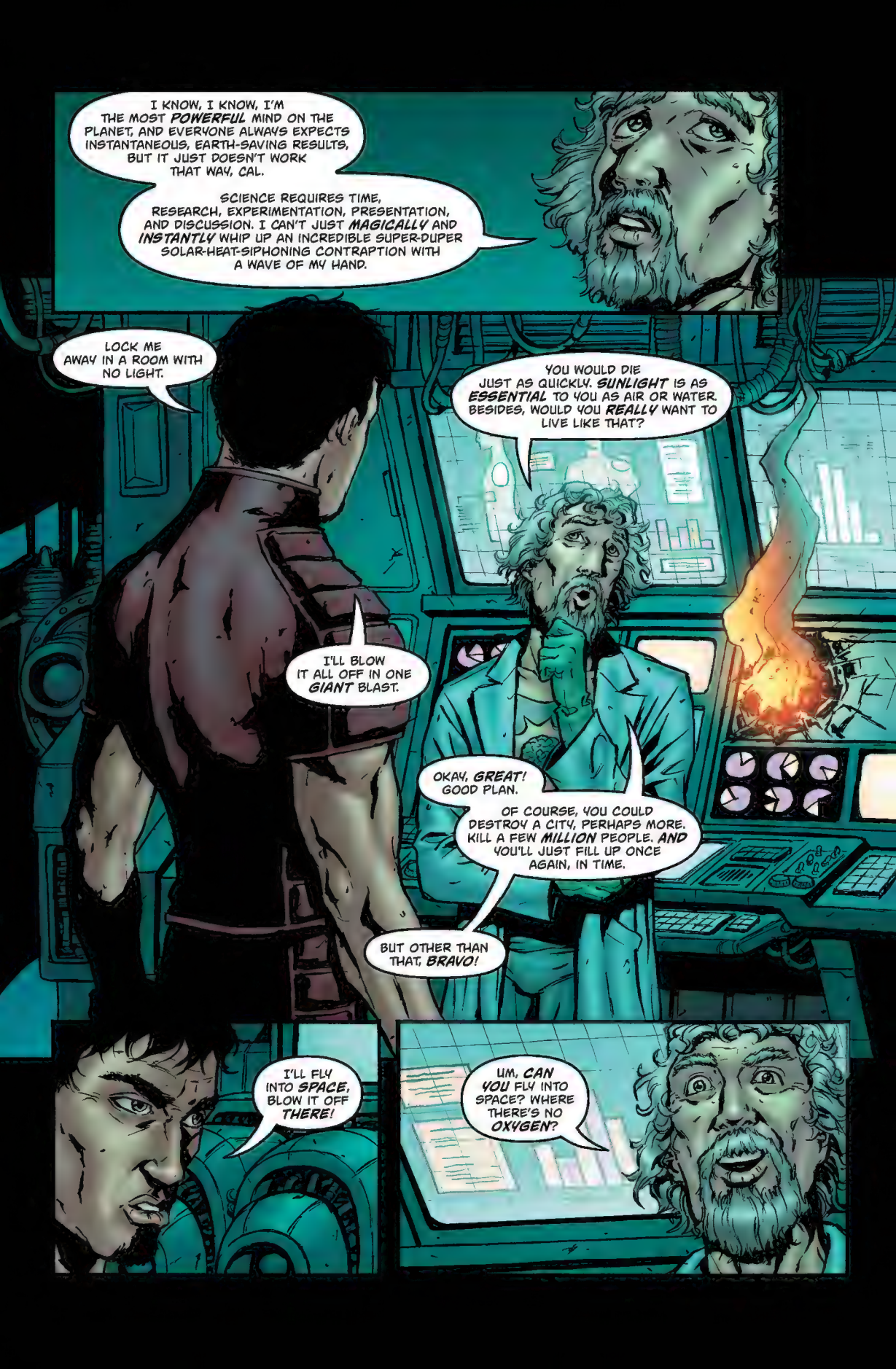
HOW LONG?

SEVEN DAYS.

THERE HAS TO BE **SOMETHING** I CAN -

JOIN GREENPEACE, I SUPPOSE. FIGHT GLOBAL WARMING.





I KNOW, I KNOW, I'M
THE MOST **POWERFUL** MIND ON THE
PLANET, AND EVERYONE ALWAYS EXPECTS
INSTANTANEOUS, EARTH-SAVING RESULTS,
BUT IT JUST DOESN'T WORK
THAT WAY, CAL.

SCIENCE REQUIRES TIME,
RESEARCH, EXPERIMENTATION, PRESENTATION,
AND DISCUSSION. I CAN'T JUST **MAGICALLY** AND
INSTANTLY WHIP UP AN INCREDIBLE SUPER-DUPER
SOLAR-HEAT-SIPHONING CONTRAPTION WITH
A WAVE OF MY HAND.

LOCK ME
AWAY IN A ROOM WITH
NO LIGHT.

YOU WOULD DIE
JUST AS QUICKLY. **SUNLIGHT** IS AS
ESSENTIAL TO YOU AS AIR OR WATER.
BESIDES, WOULD YOU **REALLY** WANT TO
LIVE LIKE THAT?

I'LL BLOW
IT ALL OFF IN ONE
GIANT BLAST.

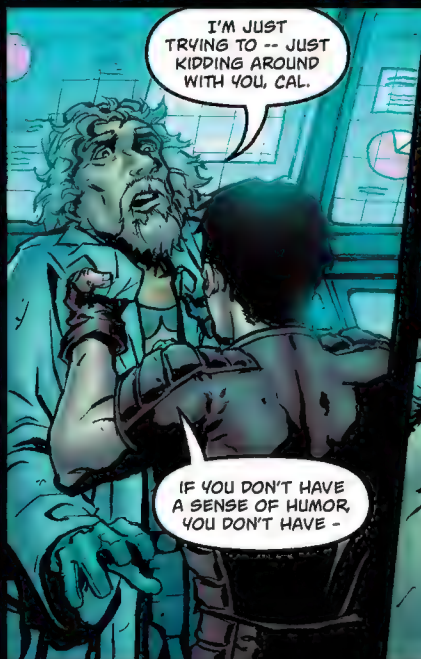
OKAY, **GREAT!**
GOOD PLAN.

OF COURSE, YOU COULD
DESTROY A CITY, PERHAPS MORE.
KILL A FEW **MILLION** PEOPLE. **AND**
YOU'LL JUST FILL UP ONCE
AGAIN, IN TIME.

BUT OTHER THAN
THAT, **BRAVO!**

I'LL FLY
INTO **SPACE**,
BLOW IT OFF
THERE!

UM, CAN
YOU FLY INTO
SPACE? WHERE
THERE'S NO
OXYGEN?



I'M JUST TRYING TO -- JUST KIDDING AROUND WITH YOU, CAL.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR, YOU DON'T HAVE -



I DON'T HAVE ANYTHING! I'M DYING! MY LIFE IS OVER, AND I'VE JUST WASTED IT ALL AWAY!



CAL, LOOK. I'LL DO WHAT I CAN.

I'LL TABLE EVERYTHING ELSE AND TRY TO FIGURE SOMETHING OUT TO HELP YOU. I'LL SPEND THE NEXT WEEK WORKING FEVERISHLY AT THIS, TRYING TO FIND SOME WAY TO SAVE YOUR LIFE.

BUT... UNDERSTAND THAT I'M NOT OPTIMISTIC.



I'M SORRY.



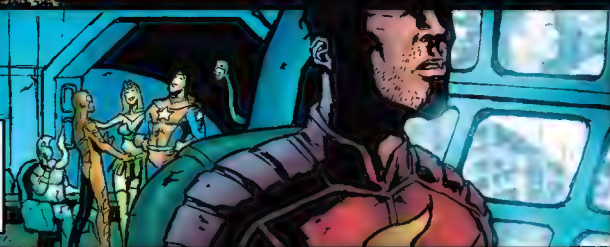
SO AM I.



THE NEXT FEW DAYS WERE -- DIFFICULT.

I WASTED HOURS LOST IN MY OWN HEAD, TRYING TO BE ALONE, KEEP FROM BLOWING UP AT ANYONE.

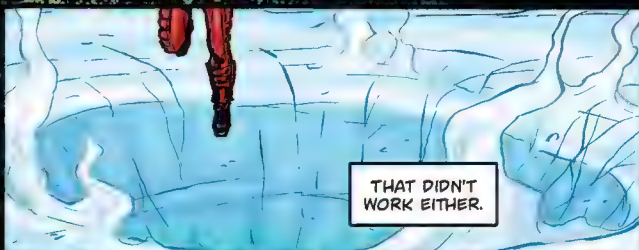
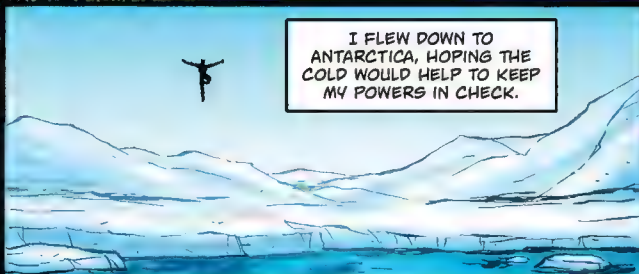
DIDN'T SAY A WORD TO MY TEAMMATES. THEY'D JUST MAKE IT INTO SOME BIG **TELETHON** OR PUBLICITY SCHEME OR SOMETHING. THAT'S THE **LAST** THING I WANTED.



I STAYED AWAY FROM THE SUN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, HOPING THAT IT WOULD BUY ME SOME EXTRA TIME, BUT THE LACK OF LIGHT ONLY SAPPED MY STRENGTH AND ADDED TO MY DEPRESSION.



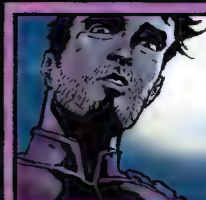
I FLEW DOWN TO ANTARCTICA, HOPING THE COLD WOULD HELP TO KEEP MY POWERS IN CHECK.



THAT DIDN'T WORK EITHER.

IT'S FUNNY. SINCE I STARTED PLAYING SUPER-HERO, I'VE BEEN BLASTED, TORTURED, BEATEN, FROZEN, ELECTROCUTED, PRACTICALLY SLICED IN HALF. BUT I DON'T THINK I EVER REALLY BELIEVED I WOULD ACTUALLY **DIE** IN ANY OF THOSE BATTLES. I FIGURED I'D ALWAYS STILL HAVE TIME TO TURN THE CORNER, TO WIN BACK AMARA, TO MAKE **SOMETHING** OF MY LIFE.

I WAS THIRTY-TWO YEARS OLD, AND WHAT DID I HAVE TO SHOW FOR IT?



BY THAT POINT, I HAD FOUR DAYS LEFT, AND A **WHOLE** LOT TO DO...



I SPENT THE NEXT FEW DAYS WORKING, TAKING DOWN EVERY TWO-BIT SUPER-VILLAIN I COULD FIND, MAKING SURE THEY WERE OUT OF ACTION - PERMANENTLY.

AND IT'S NOT LIKE ANYONE WOULD CARE IF I BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF SOME PETTY THUG OR SUPER-POWERED CRACKPOT. HELL, SOME PEOPLE EVEN *CHEERED* ME ON.

WHEN I WORKED WITH THE TEAM, IT WAS ALL SANCTIONED, BUT THIS WAS PURE VIGILANTISM. ON THE ONE HAND, WHEN I WAS ABLE TO KEEP MYSELF UNDER CONTROL, IT FELT *REALLY* GOOD.

IT WAS A RELEASE, AN ESCAPE, A REAL "SCREW YOU" TO MY SUPER HERO PEERS WHO KEPT FIGHTING THE SAME RIDICULOUS VILLAINS *OVER AND OVER* AGAIN WITHOUT EVER REALLY STOPPING 'EM FOR *GOOD*.

BUT THEN THERE WERE TIMES I LOST CONTROL AND WENT TOO FAR...

BUT THIS WAS ALL JUST KILLING TIME. THERE WAS ONE, MUCH *BIGGER* FISH I NEEDED TO FRY...

FLAME
OUT

OUT OF CONTROL?

LIVE

Lisa Williams

NEWS 3

LIVE

RAGING INFERNO

7

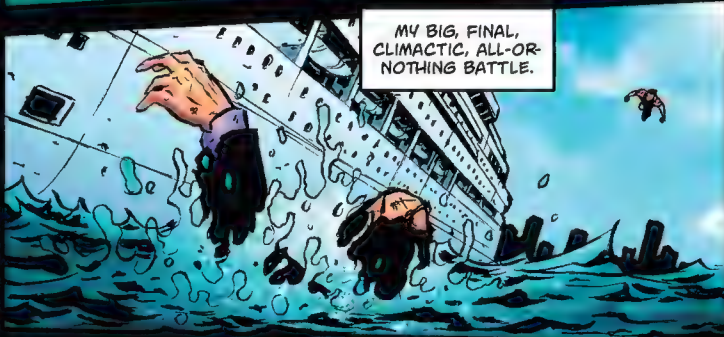
WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO
HERE. TO MAELSTROM.



MY ARCH-NEMESIS.



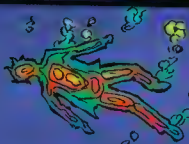
MY BIG, FINAL,
CLIMACTIC, ALL-OR-
NOTHING BATTLE.



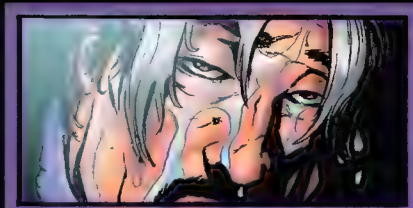
I SHOULD HAVE
JUST LET HIM DIE.

BUT I COULDN'T.
I WAS CALMING DOWN,
REGAINING MY SENSES.
MAYBE IT WAS BEING
BACK HOME, MAYBE IT
WAS THE AMOUNT OF
ENERGY I HAD BURNED
OFF. WHO KNOWS WHY,
BUT, FOR THE MOMENT,
I WAS BACK IN MY
RIGHT MIND.

AND, NO MATTER
WHAT PEOPLE WERE
SAVING ABOUT ME,
NO MATTER WHAT
THIS - *DISEASE* -
MAY HAVE CAUSED
ME TO DO, WHEN I'M
IN MY RIGHT MIND,
I'M *NOT* A KILLER.



BUT, YA KNOW, YA *TRY* TO BE
ONE OF THE *GOOD* GUYS ...



-- AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS?



I GET *BURNED*.





THE WOUND CAUTERIZED INSTANTLY, BUT IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER. I MEAN, WHAT'S THE *POINT*? I CAN'T BRING MYSELF TO *KILL* HIM. I SET OUT TO COMPROMISE MY MORALS AND I CAN'T EVEN DO *THAT* RIGHT. IF I *APPREHEND* HIM, HE'LL JUST GET OFF AGAIN. AND, EVEN IF I *DID* KILL THE GUY, THERE'D ALWAYS BE ANOTHER 10 GUYS *WAITING* TO TAKE HIS PLACE - WHAT WAS I *REALLY* ACCOMPLISHING?

I'M NOT A HERO.

I'VE MADE ALL THE WRONG CHOICES IN LIFE, SQUANDERED MY POTENTIAL, ALLOWED MYSELF TO BE RULED BY FEAR, BY FAILURE, BY ANGER.

DO I LET GO? GIVE IN? ALLOW HIM TO END IT ALL *NOW*?

MAYBE IF I LET HIM KILL ME, IT'LL RELEASE ALL OF THE EXCESS ENERGY, AND WE'LL *BOTH* DIE TOGETHER IN ONE HUGE EXPLOSIVE MELTDOWN.

AND IT'D BE SUCH AN *EASY* THING TO DO. JUST CLOSE MY EYES, LET GO OF ALL THE PAIN, RELAX. FOR *ONCE* IN MY LIFE, RELAX...

YEAH, I SUPPOSE THAT'D BE A GOOD WAY TO DIE.

TO BE CONTINUED ...

MELTDOWN

A HERO ON THE VERGE OF BURNING OUT. LITERALLY.




ASPEN

#2
OF 2

BOOK TWO RECONCILIATION & REDEMPTION

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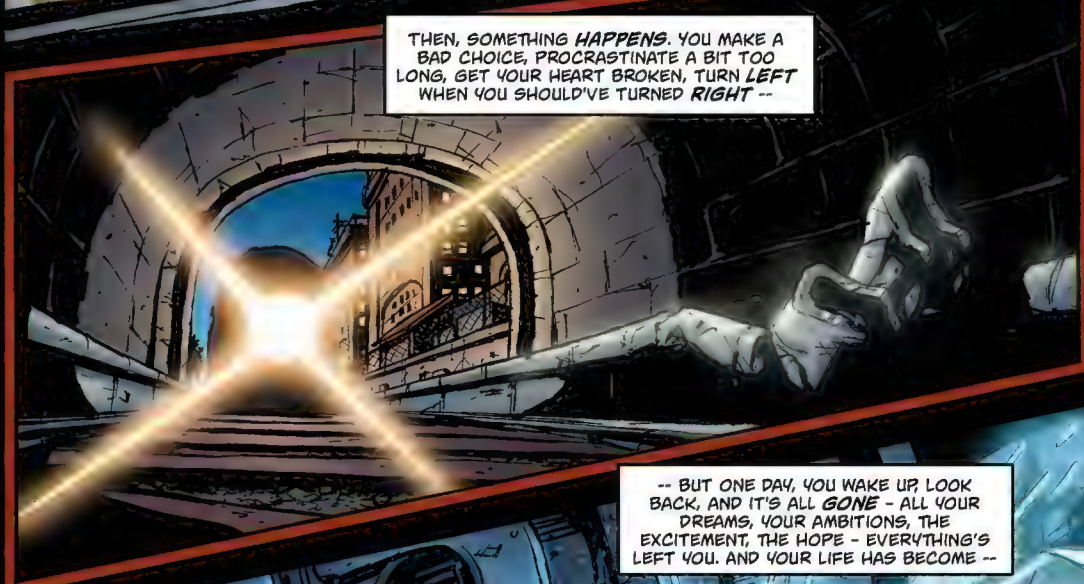
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IT'S *FUNNY* SOMETIMES, THE
TWISTS YOUR LIFE CAN TAKE.



YOU START OUT ON A PATH, WITH
BIG DREAMS. GOALS. IDEAS OF
WHO YOU'RE GOING TO BE, *WHAT*
YOU'RE GOING TO ACHIEVE.
GRAND ADVENTURES TO COME.

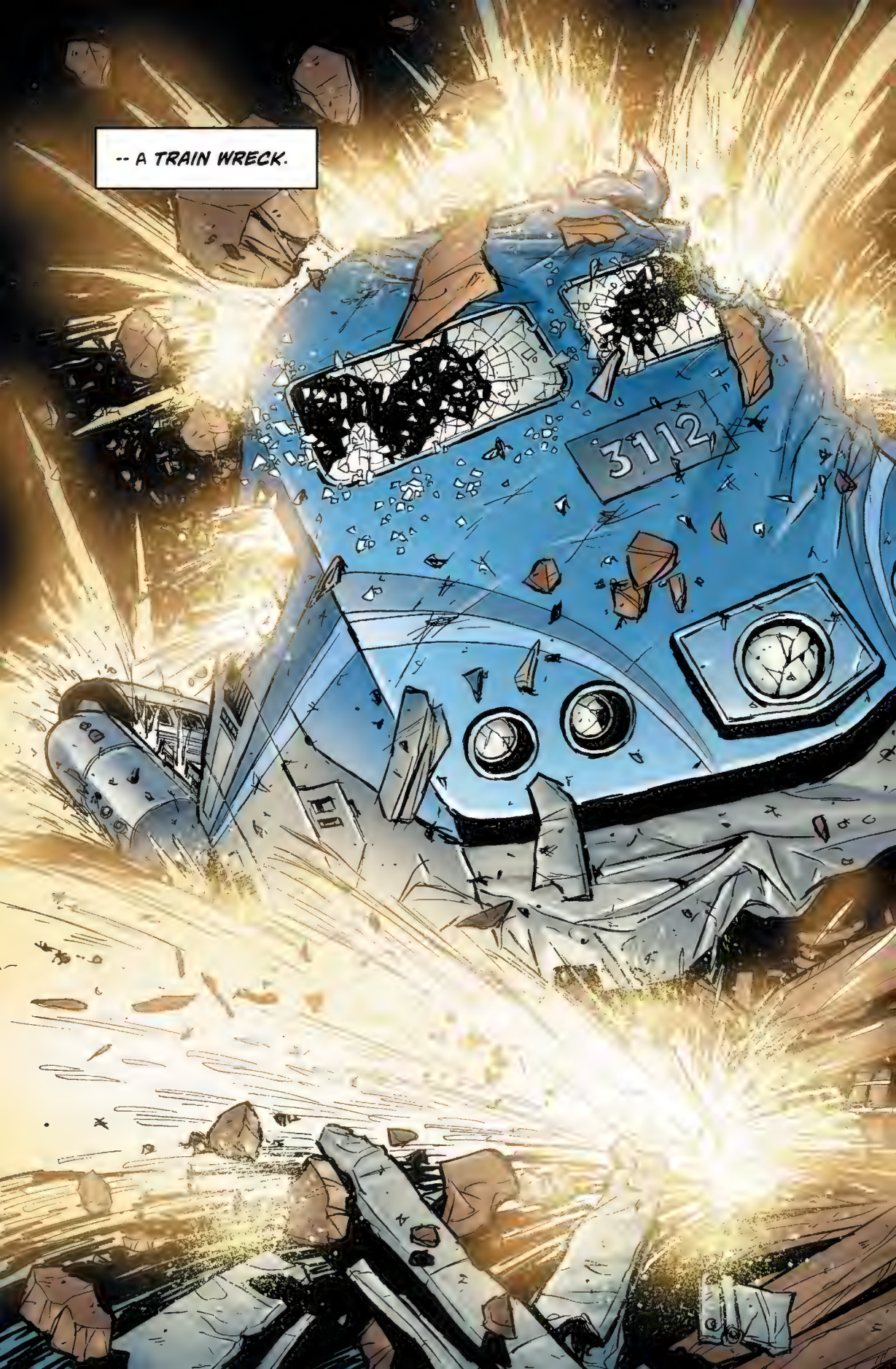


THEN, SOMETHING *HAPPENS*. YOU MAKE A
BAD CHOICE, PROCRASTINATE A BIT TOO
LONG, GET YOUR HEART BROKEN, TURN *LEFT*
WHEN YOU SHOULD'VE TURNED *RIGHT* --



-- BUT ONE DAY, YOU WAKE UP LOOK
BACK, AND IT'S ALL *GONE* - ALL YOUR
DREAMS, YOUR AMBITIONS, THE
EXCITEMENT, THE HOPE - EVERYTHING'S
LEFT YOU. AND YOUR LIFE HAS BECOME --

-- A TRAIN WRECK.





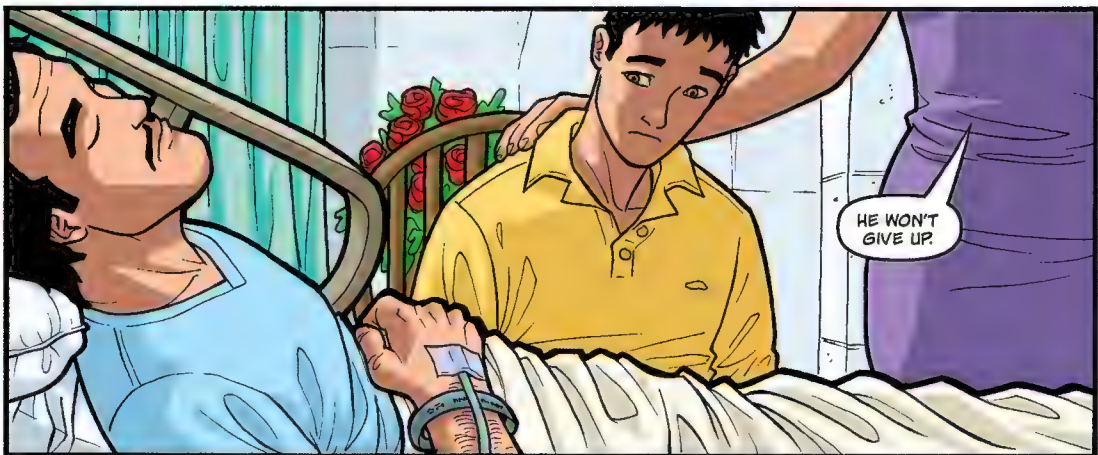
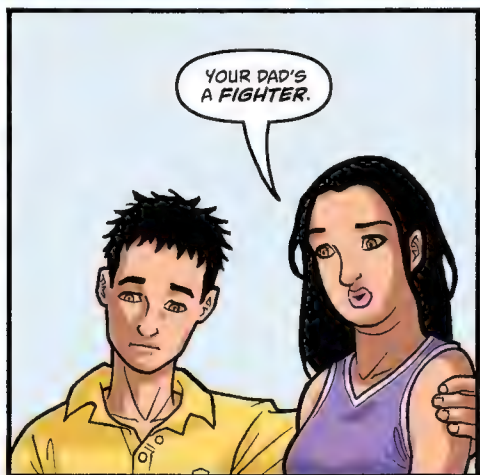
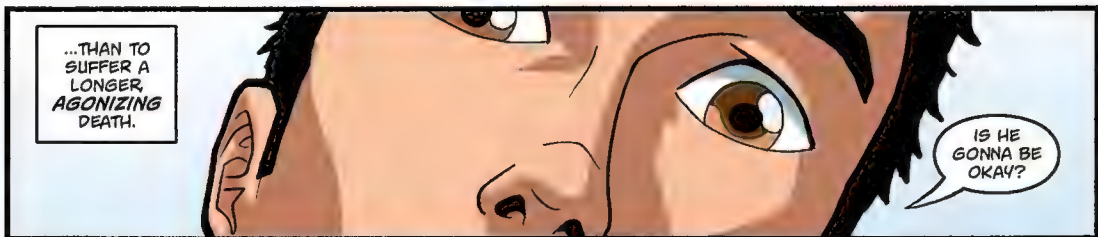
SO, HERE I AM.

I HAD *WANTED* TO DIE SINCE
THE DAY I LEFT AMARA.

BUT NOW, I THOUGHT
I WAS ACTUALLY
READY TO DIE.

I MEAN, WHY NOT, RIGHT?

IT WAS ALL GOING TO END IN
A FEW DAYS ANYWAY, AND
BETTER TO DIE *QUICKLY*...





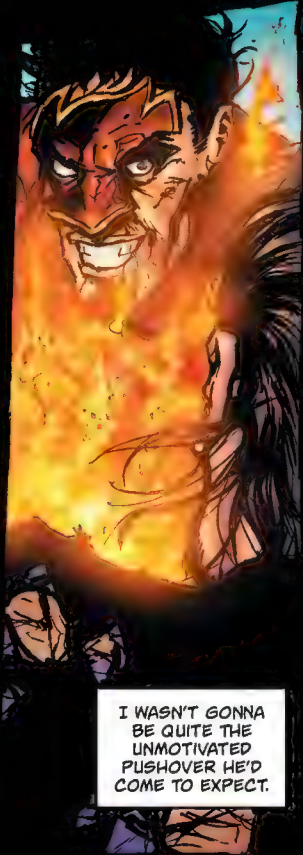
AND I WASN'T
READY TO EITHER.



I SURPRISED
MYSELF.



AND I CLEARLY
SURPRISED
MAELSTROM TOO.



I WASN'T GONNA
BE QUITE THE
UNMOTIVATED
PUSHOVER HE'D
COME TO EXPECT.



YOU KNOW
YOU CAN NEVER
BEAT ME,
DON'T YOU?



SEE, THAT'S
BECAUSE I'M ACTUALLY
THE **GOOD** GUY.

I TAKE FROM YOU
LAZY AMERICANS AND
GIVE TO THE PEOPLE
BACK HOME WHO
REALLY NEED IT.

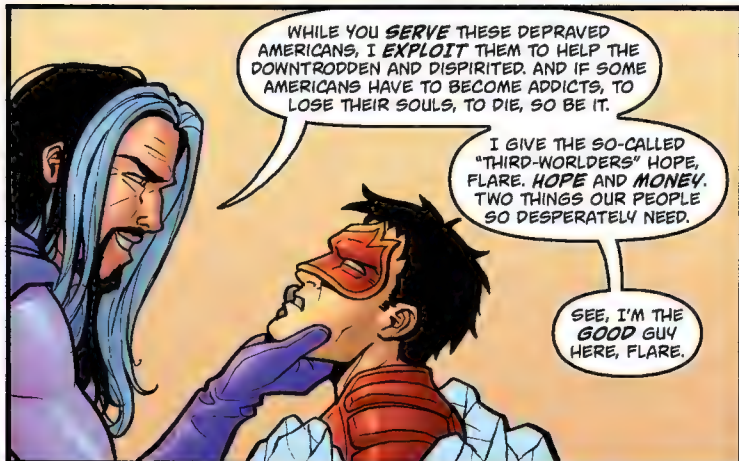


YOU'RE THE BAD GUY, FLARE.
YOU'VE TURNED YOUR BACK ON
YOUR HERITAGE. BOUGHT INTO
THE "AMERICAN DREAM."



THE "AMERICAN
DREAM" IS A NIGHTMARE.
IT'S GLUTTONY AND SELF-
ISHNESS RUN AMOK.

THAT'S WHY I'LL
ALWAYS HAVE
MILLIONS OF PATHETIC
CUSTOMERS AND A
THRIVING BUSINESS
HERE.



WHILE YOU **SERVE** THESE DEPRAVED
AMERICANS, I **EXPLOIT** THEM TO HELP THE
DOWNTRODDEN AND DISPIRITED. AND IF SOME
AMERICANS HAVE TO BECOME ADDICTS, TO
LOSE THEIR SOULS, TO DIE, SO BE IT.

I GIVE THE SO-CALLED
"THIRD-WORLDBERS" HOPE,
FLARE. **HOPE** AND **MONEY**.
TWO THINGS OUR PEOPLE
SO DESPERATELY NEED.

SEE, I'M THE
GOOD GUY
HERE, FLARE.



AND THE **GOOD**
GUYS ALWAYS WIN.



YOU WON'T
BEAT ME TODAY! YOU
NEVER COULD!

ALL THOSE TIMES WE'VE
FOUGHT, AND I GOT AWAY
EVERY SINGLE TIME!

BECAUSE YOU
NEED ME, CAL!



I'M THE ONLY
CONSTANT YOU HAVE --
THE ONLY THING THAT
GIVES YOUR LIFE
FOCUS!



WITHOUT
ME, YOU'RE
NOTHING!



NOTHING!



AND THAT WAS IT.

AFTER ALL OF THAT, ALL THOSE YEARS, ALL THAT ANGST, IT WAS OVER. **HE** WAS OVER. IT WAS ALL SO DAMN ... ANTI-CLIMACTIC.

NO BIG CELEBRATION, NO BIG VICTORY PARADE DOWN BISCAYNE BOULEVARD, NO KEY TO THE CITY.

IT WAS JUST - *OVER*.

WAS IT WORTH IT? ALL THOSE YEARS, ALL THOSE BATTLES. ALL THE TIME I HAD SPENT HATING HIM, FEARING HIM, BUILDING HIM UP IN MY HEAD TO BE SOME HUGE, UNBEATABLE FORCE OF NATURE.

SO MUCH WASTED ANGER, AND ENERGY.

AND, IN A H...
IT WAS A...
SUDDENLY...

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SO MUCH WASTED ANGER, AND ENERGY.

AND, IN A H...
IT WAS A...
SUDDENLY...

HEARTBEAT,
JUST,
OVER.

HE SURVIVED, BUT *BARELY*.

HE'LL BE OUT OF COMMISSION FOR A WHILE THOUGH, AND HIS EMPIRE WILL HOPEFULLY CRUMBLE AWAY IN HIS ABSENCE.

AND, NO MATTER HOW QUICKLY HE GETS OUT OF PRISON THIS TIME, HE'LL **NEVER** BE ABLE TO ESCAPE HIS NEW LIFE-SENTENCE AS A HORRIBLY DISFIGURED VICTIM OF THIRD-DEGREE **BURNS**.

AND WITH
FADING ME
GHOSTS FR

HE'LL BE OUT OF COMMISSION FOR A WHILE THOUGH, AND HIS EMPIRE WILL HOPEFULLY CRUMBLE AWAY IN HIS ABSENCE.

AND, NO MATTER HOW QUICKLY HE GETS OUT OF PRISON THIS TIME, HE'LL **NEVER** BE ABLE TO ESCAPE HIS NEW LIFE-SENTENCE AS A HORRIBLY DISFIGURED VICTIM OF THIRD-DEGREE **BURNS**.

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AND WITH MAELSTROM NOW JUST A FADING MEMORY, THERE WERE OTHER GHOSTS FROM MY PAST TO ATTEND TO.

I WAS HOME - FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A LONG TIME. AND I WAS READY TO PUT THE WHOLE SUPER-HERO THING BEHIND ME, SOAK IN ALL OF MY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES ONE LAST TIME.

MY OLD HANG-OUTS. PLACES AMARA AND I USED TO GO TOGETHER.

COCONUT GROVE.

THE MALL WHERE WE HUNG OUT AND PLAYED ARCADE GAMES AS TEENAGERS. ZAXXON. DIG DUG. TRON. SHE REALLY KICKED ASS AT CENTIPEDE.

MY OLD HIGH SCHOOL. MAYBE AFTER I'M GONE THEY'LL PUT UP A PLAQUE. OR A STATUE.

OF COURSE, I DOUBT THEY'D EVEN KNOW WHO I AM ANYMORE. OR CARE.

ANOTHER WASHED-UP ALUMNUS WHO NEVER FULFILLED HIS POTENTIAL.

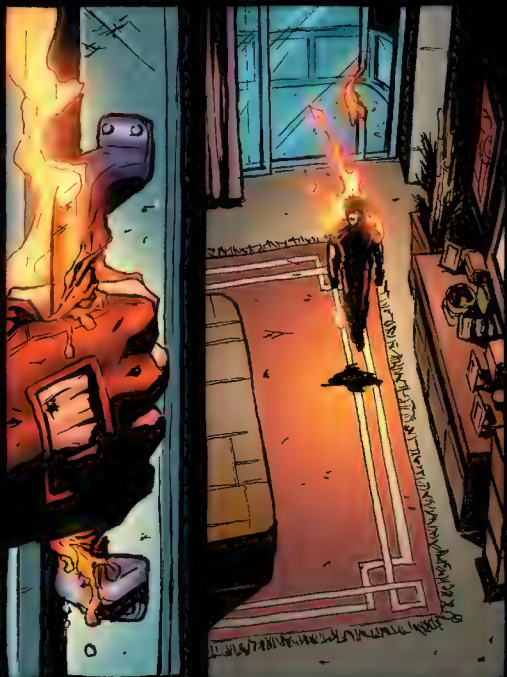
MOM AND DAD.

I MUST'VE BEEN SUCH A DISAPPOINTMENT TO THEM. THEY LOVED ME SO DAMN MUCH, AND I JUST ... LEFT.

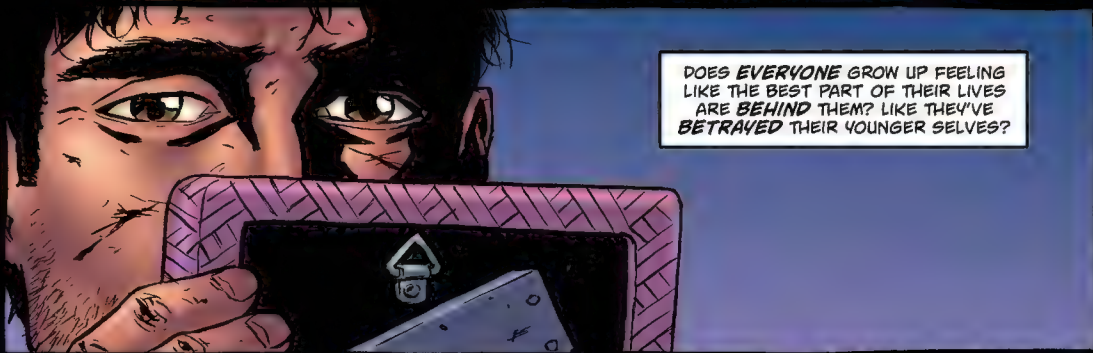
9-1095	Aaron Timothy K MD	9538 NW 43 Ave.	
4-1938	Abar Edward & Silvia	586 Crescent Circ.	
9-5944	Abbey A K	5839 NW 94 Ave.	
-4928	Abbey Brian & Doris	8219 Citrus Blvd.	
-3282	Abbey Patricia	3920 SW 67 Av	
5405	Abbott Forrest	9183 SW 3 Ave.	
5049	Abbott J	375 NW 4 Ave.	
959	Abby Eric	294 NW 192 Ave.	
290	Abdow P & R	3823 SW 183 Ave.	
82	Abel Lilly	182 River Dr.	
14	Abel Richard	183 SW 22 Rd.	
4	Abel William & Ann	11815 SW 34 Ave.	
2	Abels Amara	345 Ocean Dr.	23
5	Abels G	49 Ave.	24
	Aberc	lie	
	Al	ark	392
		ve.	354
		1245 SW 92 St.	644
		193 SW 45 Ave.	293
		2SW 182 Ave.	394
		4 NW 172 St.	253-0
		23 Circle Rd.	251-1
		NW 5 Ave.	353-19
		d T	
			255-19
		332 Wells St.	251-583
		sa	
			251-2882
			374-1955



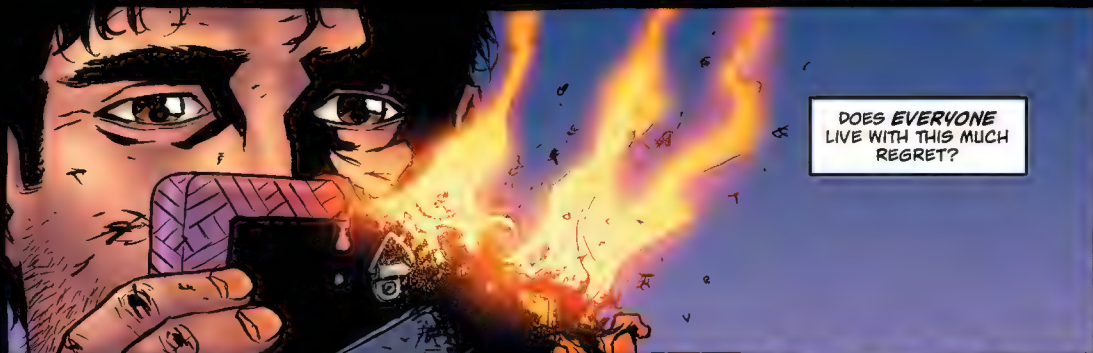
IT WAS TOO LATE TO SEEK FORGIVENESS FROM THE DEAD. BUT MAYBE THERE WAS STILL TIME TO MAKE AMENDS WITH THE LIVING.



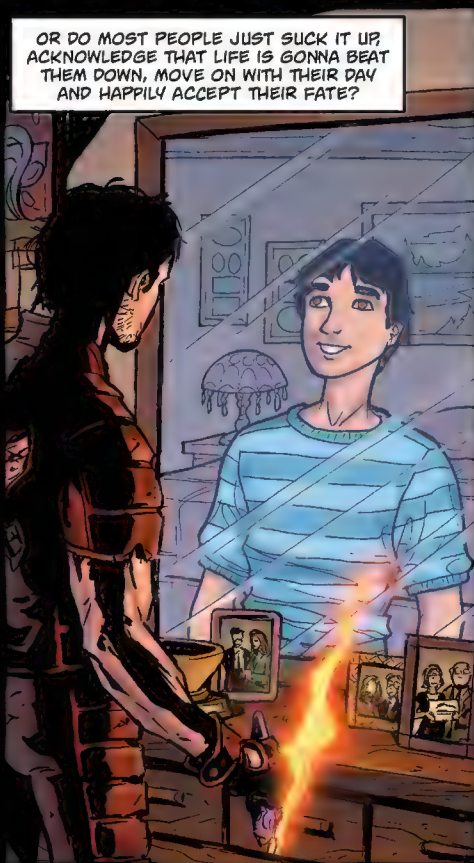
AMARA.



DOES **EVERYONE** GROW UP FEELING LIKE THE BEST PART OF THEIR LIVES ARE **BEHIND** THEM? LIKE THEY'VE **BETRAYED** THEIR YOUNGER SELVES?



DOES **EVERYONE** LIVE WITH THIS MUCH REGRET?



OR DO MOST PEOPLE JUST SUCK IT UP, ACKNOWLEDGE THAT LIFE IS GONNA BEAT THEM DOWN, MOVE ON WITH THEIR DAY AND HAPPILY ACCEPT THEIR FATE?



YOU ALWAYS DID KNOW HOW TO LIGHT UP A ROOM.



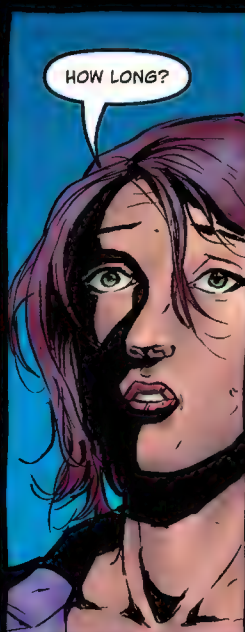
SO, MURDER MAYHEM
AND GENERAL UNBRIDLED
VIGILANTISM AREN'T **ENOUGH**
FOR YOU? YOU'RE ADDING
BREAKING AND ENTERING TO
YOUR REPERTOIRE?







MY POWERS.
THEY'RE KINDA
...EATING ME
ALIVE.

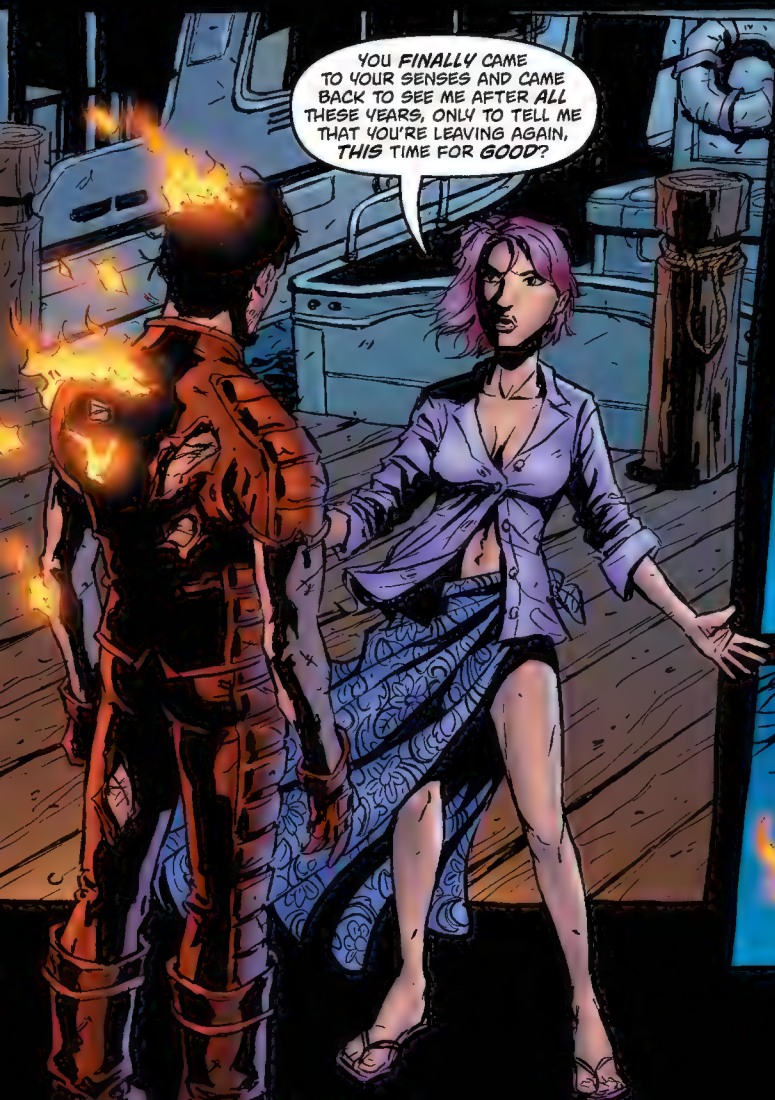
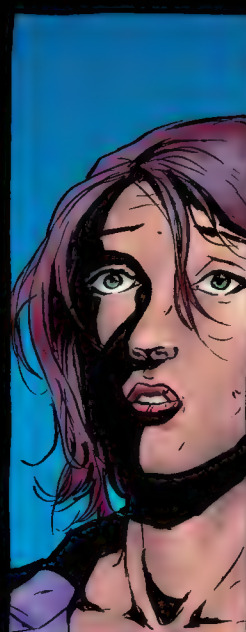


HOW LONG?



TOMORROW.
MAYBE THE NEXT DAY.
DEPENDS ON HOW MUCH I
USE THE POWERS. THE
MORE I USE 'EM, THE
FASTER I MELT AWAY.

OR SO
I'M TOLD.



YOU *FINALLY* CAME
TO YOUR SENSES AND CAME
BACK TO SEE ME AFTER ALL
THESE YEARS, ONLY TO TELL ME
THAT YOU'RE LEAVING AGAIN.
THIS TIME FOR GOOD?



THAT'S CRUEL.





DID YOU WANT ME
TO TELL YOU THAT
IT'S ALL **OKAY**?

DID YOU COME
SEEKING ABSOLUTION,
NOT EVEN **CARING** HOW
MUCH **PAIN** IT MIGHT
CAUSE ME TO SEE YOUR
FACE AGAIN?



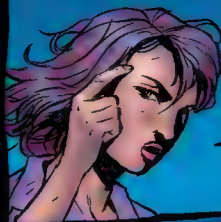
I JUST NEEDED
TO TALK TO YOU, TO
SORT THROUGH -
- I WASN'T
THINKING -



SEE, CAL, THAT'S
THE THING. YOU JUST
DON'T **THINK**!



WHEN YOU'RE
FIGHTING, LIKE WHEN
YOU USED TO PLAY BALL,
YOU'RE **BRILLIANT**. YOU'RE
CONFIDENT, INNOVATIVE,
QUICK ON YOUR FEET.



BUT IN YOUR PRIVATE
LIFE YOU'RE **LOCKED** IN YOUR OWN
HEAD, NEVER CONSIDERING WHAT
THE **OTHER** PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE
MAY NEED OR WANT.

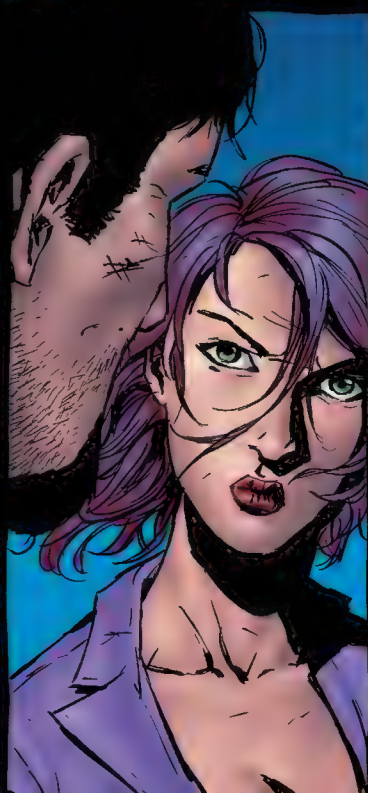


YOU DIDN'T NEED
TO **LEAVE** ME.

WE COULD'VE
WORKED IT OUT. WE
COULD'VE FOUND A
WAY, CAL.



BUT YOU WERE
SO WRAPPED UP IN YOUR
OWN FRUSTRATIONS THAT
YOU DIDN'T STOP TO **TALK**
TO ME. NOW, ON YOUR
DEATHBED, YOU **FINALLY**
RETURN AND TRY TO HAVE
A CONVERSATION WE
SHOULD HAVE HAD A
DECADE AGO?





I'M SORRY,
I SHOULDN'T
HAVE SAID --

I'VE KNOWN YOU SINCE
WE WERE KIDS. YOU'VE GOT
SUCH AN INCREDIBLE **HEART**
HIDING IN THERE, AND THE BEST
OF INTENTIONS, BUT ...



I DON'T KNOW. MAYBE
I'VE BEEN SO FOCUSED ON EVERY-
THING THAT'S **WRONG** WITH MY LIFE, I
JUST NEVER APPRECIATED EVERY-
THING THAT WAS **RIGHT**.

AND NOW THAT
I'VE FINALLY REALIZED
THAT, IT'S TOO LATE TO
CHANGE ANYTHING.
TOO LATE TO MAKE IT
UP TO YOU.



THE **ONE** TIME IN
MY LIFE I THOUGHT I WAS
DOING SOMETHING COM-
PLETELY SELFLESS WAS
WHEN I **LEFT** YOU.

YOU DESERVED SO
MUCH MORE THAN --



I'M
SORRY.



LISTEN, CAL,
YOU'VE GOT A LITTLE
TIME LEFT, RIGHT?

PUT DOWN THE
COSTUME, WE'LL GET
AWAY SOMEWHERE TO-
GETHER, SOME ISLAND,
WHERE WE CAN BE --

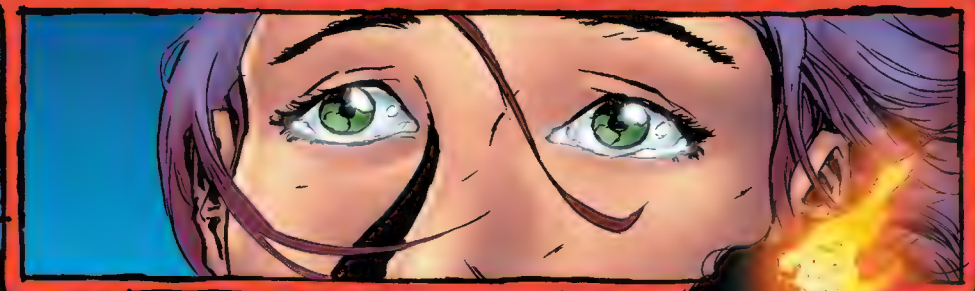


WHAT -- ?

EXPLOSION.
HUNDREDS OF MILES
AWAY, BUT IT FEELS LIKE
IT'S RIGHT NEXT TO ME.
SO MUCH
HEAT --

I'VE
GOTTA
GO.

I DON'T WANT
TO LEAVE YOU
AGAIN, BUT ...

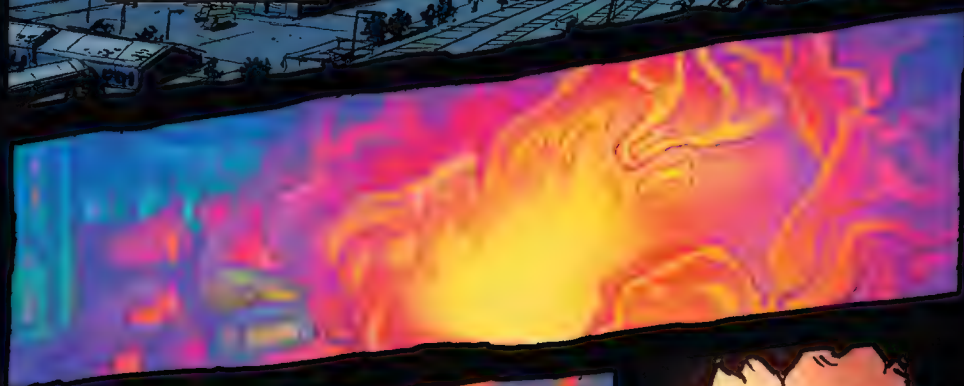




GOODBYE,
CAL.



HUNDREDS OF MILES
IN MERE MINUTES.



BUT NOT QUITE
FAST ENOUGH.

A MASSIVE LANDSLIDE CAUSED
BY A HORRIFYING TRAIN
WRECK. NO SUPER-VILLAINS;
NO EVIL, MANIACAL PLOT;
JUST AN EVERYDAY ACCIDENT.





STILL HUNDREDS
ALIVE AND TRAPPED
IN THERE.

THEY'RE DYING BY THE
SECOND, THOUGH.

NOT MUCH
TIME LEFT.
INSIDES FEEL
LIKE THEY'RE
MELTING.

WELL, HERE
GOES
EVERYTHING.



I'M GOING TO DIE, BUT NO
NEED TO FOR ALL THESE OTHER
PEOPLE TO JOIN ME.

PEOPLE WHOSE ONLY CRIME WAS
TO GET ON THE *WRONG* TRAIN AT
THE *WRONG* TIME, OR TO WORK
IN A GIANT BUILDING WITH A
TRAIN RUNNING UNDERNEATH.

NO THOUGHT, NO
PAUSES - JUST ACTION.

AND PAIN.

CAN BARELY FEEL
MY LEGS ANYMORE.
NOT GOOD.

THE *FLARE*, LITTLE-KNOWN-
HERO-TURNED-*VIGILANTE*, SEEMS TO
HAVE TURNED BACK TO *HERO*, AS HE'S
BEEN ALL OVER THIS WRECKAGE.

FROM WHAT WE'VE
BEEN ABLE TO GATHER, HE'S
BEEN ABLE TO LOCATE AND RECOVER
LITERALLY HUNDREDS OF SURVIVORS
IN THESE TWO HOURS SINCE
THE EXPLOSION.

I'M JOINED BY
CAPTAIN RICHARD T. ADAMS
OF THE STATE FIRE RESCUE
DEPARTMENT. CAPTAIN, *HOW*
IS HE DOING THIS?

HONESTLY, WE
HAVEN'T WANTED TO
STOP HIM TO ASK.

WITHOUT HIM, WELL,
A LOT MORE PEOPLE WOULD
HAVE DIED HERE.



"I'M GETTING WORD NOW THAT THE SURROUNDING BUILDINGS ARE LOOKING MORE AND MORE UNSTABLE. DINA, IS THAT CORRECT?"

"THAT'S RIGHT, JAN. ANOTHER COLLAPSE SEEMS IMMINENT, AS THE AREA CONTINUES TO COLLAPSE DOWN IN UPON ITSELF."

"WE COULD BE IN FOR A SERIES OF DANGEROUS EVENTS HERE --"

"-- AND THE RESCUE WORKERS HERE ON THE SCENE HAVE BEEN GIVEN ORDERS TO FALL BACK AND SEEK COVER."





I COULDN'T GET THE
GIRL OUT OF THERE.

IF I **MOVED** THE TWISTED METAL
SITTING ON HER LEGS, IT LOOKED
LIKE THE WHOLE PLACE MIGHT
COLLAPSE IN ON US. IF I TRIED
TO **BURN** IT AWAY, I'D BURN **HER**
APART IN THE PROCESS.

NO PRECISION TO MY
POWERS ANYMORE.

CAN'T RISK IT.



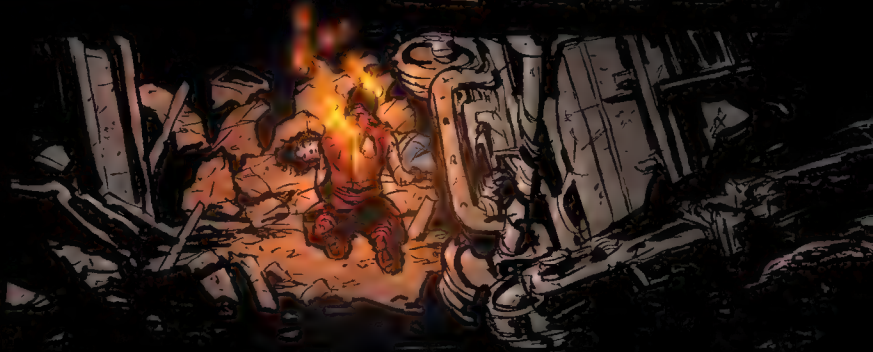
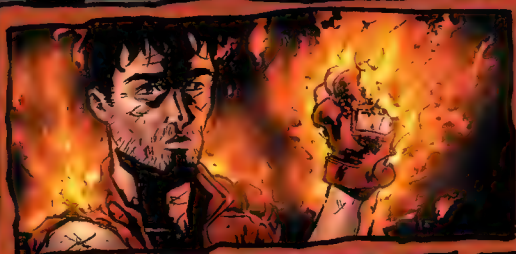




SO I SAT.

AND WHILE SHE SLEPT,
I TOLD HER THIS
WHOLE LONG-WINDED,
PATHETIC STORY.

THE STORY OF
MY NOT-SO-LIFE.







I'VE FOLLOWED YOUR CAREER FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, AND NOW YOU'RE RIGHT HERE. THAT'S SO COOL.

YOU DON'T LOOK SO GOOD.

I'M SURE I LOOK COMPLETELY WONDERFUL.

I'VE SEEN WORSE.



REALLY?



YEAH. REALLY. SCARY, HUH?

SO, UH... WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

SANDRA.

LOOK, SANDRA, I'VE GOT NO CONTROL OF MY POWERS ANYMORE. I'M AFRAID THAT IF I TRY TO GET YOU OUT OF THERE I'M JUST GONNA BURN YOU.

BUT HELP'LL BE HERE SOON, AND WE'LL --

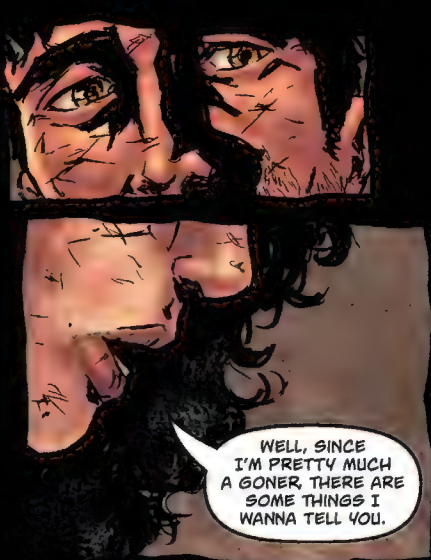


SO, I'M PRETTY MUCH GONNA DIE, AREN'T I?

I'LL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT.



LOOK, YOU'RE MY ABSOLUTE FAVORITE SUPERHERO, AND I SO WANNA BELIEVE AND ALL, BUT YOU CAN BARELY MOVE. MY LEGS ARE, LIKE, CRUSHED. THERE CAN'T BE MUCH OXYGEN IN HERE...



WELL, SINCE I'M PRETTY MUCH A GONER, THERE ARE SOME THINGS I WANNA TELL YOU.



I KNOW IT'S SILLY AND CHILDISH AND STUFF, BUT I USED TO REHEARSE THIS CONVERSATION, LIKE, ALL THE TIME. IN MY HEAD, OUT LOUD AT THE BUS STOP WHILE I WAS DAYDREAMING IN CLASS.

DO YOU EVER DO THAT? IMAGINE CONVERSATIONS, LIKE WHAT YOU'D SAY TO SOMEONE, WHAT THEY'D SAY IN RESPONSE, AND ALL THAT?



ALL THE TIME.



SO THIS IS WHAT I ALWAYS IMAGINED I'D SAY IF I MET YOU...

"I HAVE ALWAYS LOOKED UP TO YOU. AS A *LATINA* GIRL IN A MOSTLY *WHITE* SCHOOL, I WAS AN OUTCAST, JUST LIKE YOU IN THE HALL OF HEROES BUT I FIGURED, IF *YOU* COULD HACK IT, SO COULD *I*, AND THAT GOT ME THROUGH THE DAY."

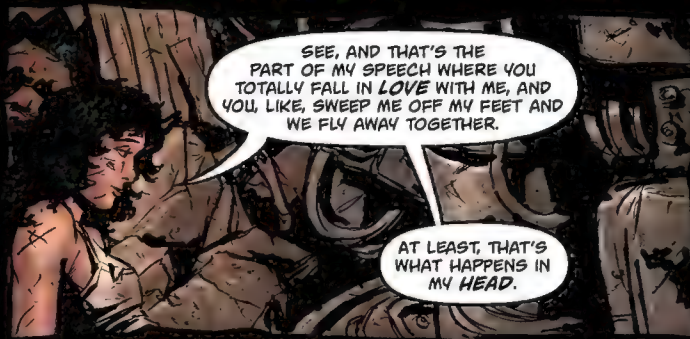
"I EVEN HAD YOUR POSTERS UP ON MY WALL, I HAD YOUR LUNCHBOX, YOUR LIGHT-UP FISTS ACTION FIGURE. I LOOKED AT YOU AND I THOUGHT, 'SANDRA, IF THE *FLARE* CAN SUCCEED, IF *HE* CAN GET BEATEN TO HELL OVER AND OVER AND KEEP COMING BACK, THEN SO CAN *I*.'"

"I ALWAYS LOOKED UP TO YOU, ALWAYS RESPECTED YOU. ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT, AS LONG AS THERE WAS SOMEONE LIKE *YOU* IN THE WORLD, A *HERO* LIKE YOU, IT COULDN'T POSSIBLY BE SUCH A *BAD* PLACE TO LIVE, RIGHT?"



"BUT YOU ALWAYS LOOKED SO *SAD*, LIKE YOU WERE BROKEN INSIDE, AND I THOUGHT IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO KNOW HOW IMPORTANT YOU'VE BEEN TO ME, HOW MUCH YOU'VE *INSPIRED* ME."

"BECAUSE MAYBE THAT WOULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE. MAYBE YOU'D *SMILE* FOR ONCE, YOU KNOW?"



AND THIS IS WHERE MY SPEECH GOT REALLY CHEESY...

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT THE LIGHT-UP *FISTS* WERE THE WRONG WAY TO GO WITH THAT DOLL. I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT WAS YOUR *HEART* THAT BURNT THE BRIGHT-EST. AT LEAST TO ME."

SEE, AND THAT'S THE PART OF MY SPEECH WHERE YOU TOTALLY FALL IN *LOVE* WITH ME, AND YOU, LIKE, SWEEP ME OFF MY FEET AND WE FLY AWAY TOGETHER.

AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS IN MY HEAD.





THANK YOU,
SANDRA.



UM, WHAT'RE
YOU *DOING*? I
THOUGHT YOU -



YOU'RE *NOT*
GOING TO DIE
HERE.

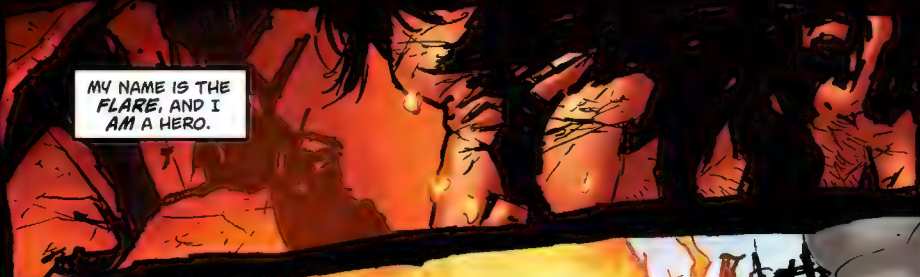


I MAY, BUT
NOT YOU ...

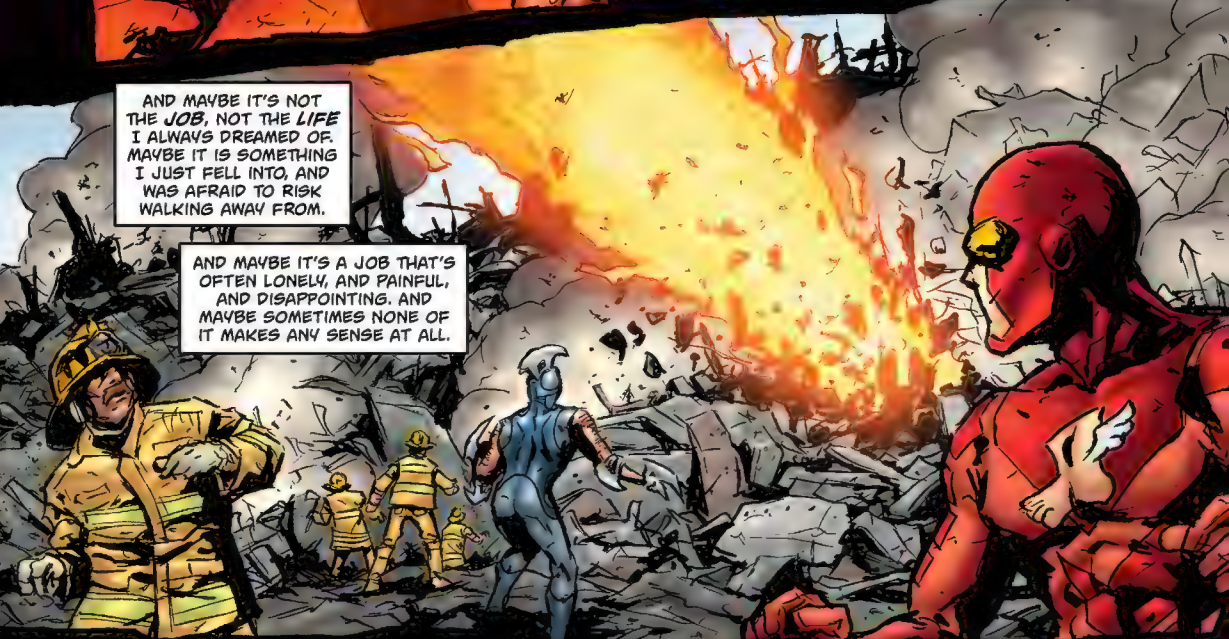
GOTTA CONCENTRATE
ALL OF MY ENERGY FOR-
WARDS, KEEP THE HEAT
AWAY FROM YOU.

I'D SAY
"STAND BACK",
BUT ...





MY NAME IS THE
FLARE, AND I
AM A HERO.



AND MAYBE IT'S NOT
THE **JOB**, NOT THE **LIFE**
I ALWAYS DREAMED OF.
MAYBE IT IS SOMETHING
I JUST FELL INTO, AND
WAS AFRAID TO RISK
WALKING AWAY FROM.

AND MAYBE IT'S A JOB THAT'S
OFTEN LONELY, AND PAINFUL,
AND DISAPPOINTING. AND
MAYBE SOMETIMES NONE OF
IT MAKES ANY SENSE AT ALL.



BUT AT THE END OF THE
DAY, IT **MATTERS**. IT
TOUCHES PEOPLE. IT
CHANGES LIVES. EVEN IF
ONLY IN SMALL WAYS,
TANGENTIAL WAYS, IT STILL
MAKES A DIFFERENCE -
STILL **MATTERS**.



AND MAYBE, AT TIMES, I ACTED LIKE A
FOOL, OR BEAT MYSELF UP OVER
PETTY AND STUPID THINGS, AND MAYBE
I WAS INCONSIDERATE - EVEN CRUEL -
SOMETIMES, BUT I THINK EVERYONE
DOES THAT. EVERYONE MAKES SOME
BAD CHOICES. EVERYONE SCREWS IT
ALL UP NOW AND THEN.



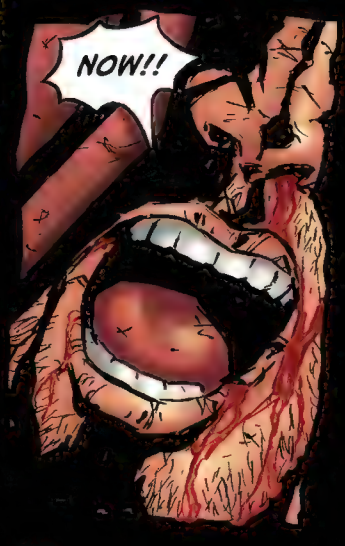
THE IMPORTANT THING
IS THAT, IN THE FINAL
ANALYSIS, IN THE SHORT
TIME I WAS HERE ON THIS
PLANET, I HELPED.

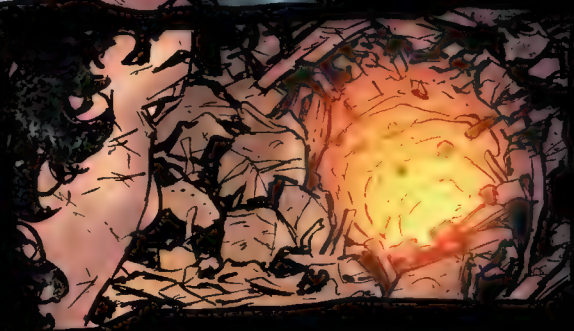
HELPED A FEW PEOPLE TO LIVE A
LITTLE HAPPIER, LIVE A LITTLE
LONGER, MAYBE HELPED TO CHANGE
SOME SMALL CORNER OF THE WORLD
JUST A LITTLE BIT FOR THE BETTER.

THE IMPORTANT
THING IS ...



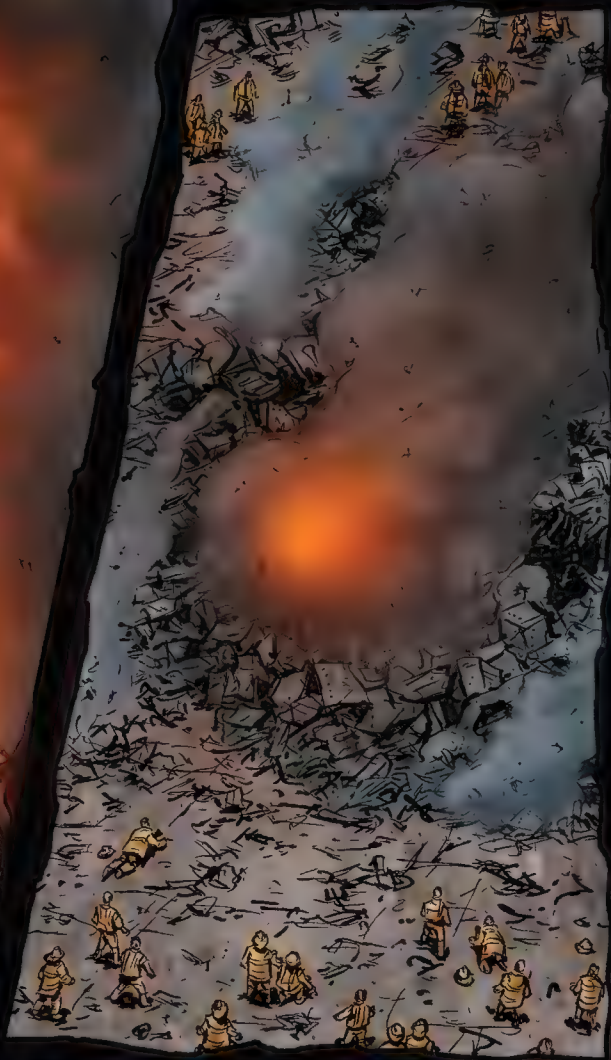
...I MATTERED.

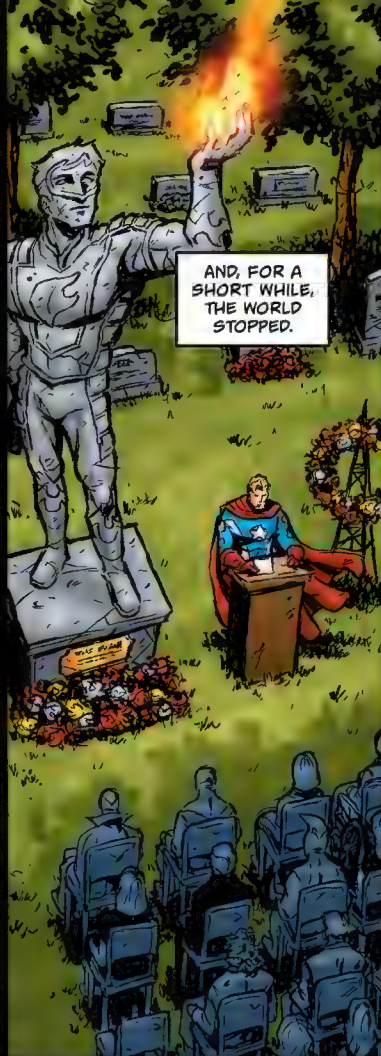












AND, FOR A
SHORT WHILE,
THE WORLD
STOPPED.



FOLKS LAID DOWN THEIR ARMS,
THEIR FEARS, THEIR HATREDS, TO
PAY TRIBUTE TO A FALLEN HERO.

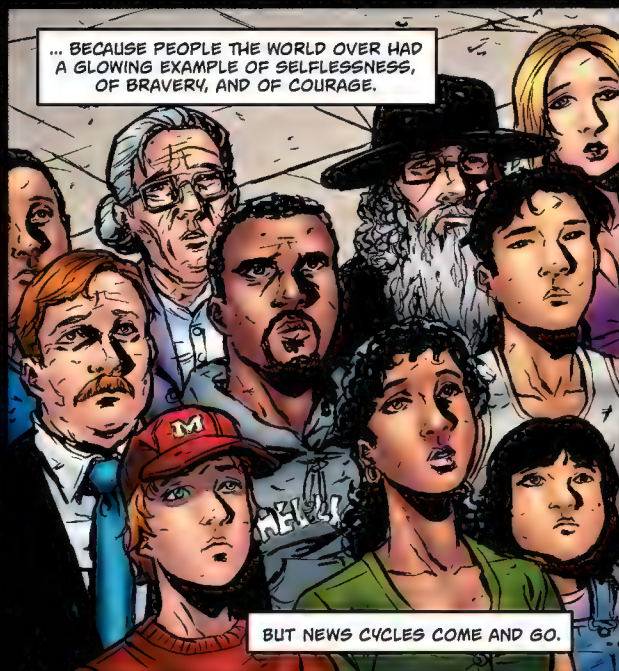


PEOPLE DIE
EVERY DAY, BUT
SUPERHEROES?

THAT'S FAR
MORE RARE.



AND, FOR THAT SAME SHORT
WHILE, THE WORLD WAS A BETTER
PLACE, EVEN IF ONLY SLIGHTLY ...



... BECAUSE PEOPLE THE WORLD OVER HAD
A GLOWING EXAMPLE OF SELFLESSNESS,
OF BRAVERY, AND OF COURAGE.

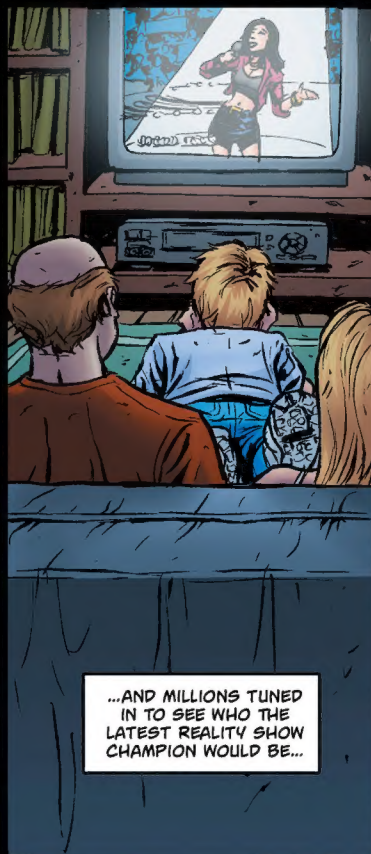
BUT NEWS CYCLES COME AND GO.



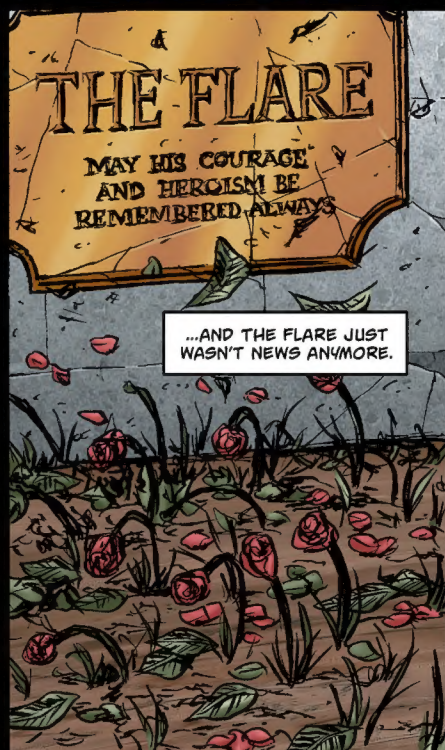
A FEW DAYS LATER, A
POP SINGER LEFT HER
BABY ALONE IN A
MERCEDES ON A HOT
DAY WHILE SHOPPING IN
PRADA...



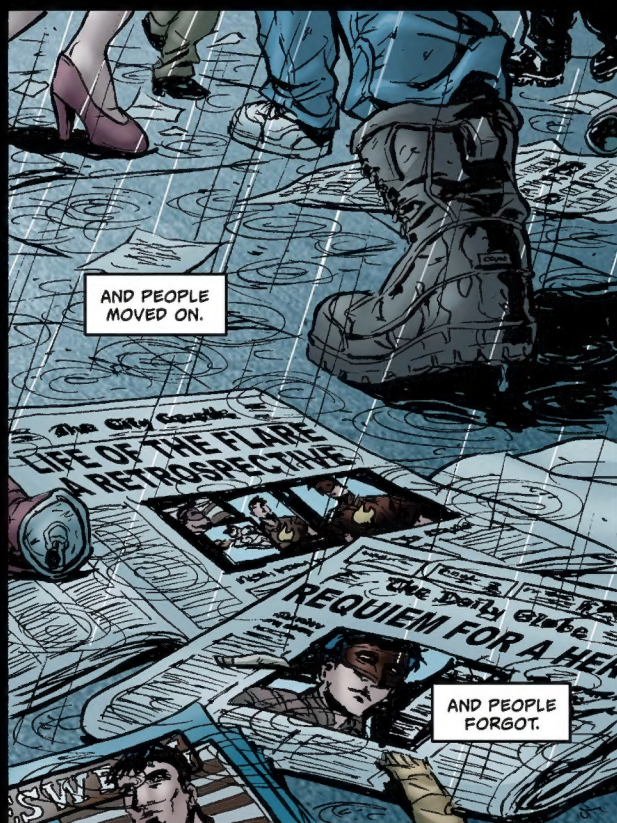
...AND A BASKETBALL STAR
ALLEGEDLY WAS CAUGHT
WITH A HOOKER...



...AND MILLIONS TUNED
IN TO SEE WHO THE
LATEST REALITY SHOW
CHAMPION WOULD BE...



...AND THE FLARE JUST
WASN'T NEWS ANYMORE.



AND PEOPLE
MOVED ON.

AND PEOPLE
FORGOT.

